

Retired nurse, 81, raising awareness about Valley Fever

By **Weldon B. Johnson** - Jul. 24, 2009 11:52 AM
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Lois Weston always said that if she ever had enough money, she would start a foundation to try to help others.

Last month, the 81-year-old retired nurse decided she wasn't going to wait until she got rich. She turned her efforts to helping an established group get what it needs.

That's how Weston began raising money and awareness for the Valley Fever Corridor Project, an initiative from the University of Arizona's Valley Fever Center for Excellence.

Weston read in a June 8 editorial in *The Arizona Republic* that the project was raising \$60,000 to cover its operating budget for the upcoming year. So she sprang into action. She already had a personal connection to the disease: Her daughter-in-law was diagnosed with the condition in 2006.

"I had told my one special friend I would like to win enough money to help people," Weston said. "He said, 'Why don't you start a foundation.' That went right past me like nothing. I just said, 'That takes money.' But I would see young people who had started foundations or organized charity events without a lot of money. When I read that article, it hit me right in the face like it was directed at me. I said I have to jump on this and get something done."

Not knowing where to start, Weston visited her bank and was advised it might be easier to partner with an existing non-profit organization rather than start her own. Her next visit was to her church. One of the ministers put her in touch with Mark Cosby, president of Room for Joy, a local non-profit organization. Cosby helped connect Weston with the Valley Fever Center for Excellence.

Within two weeks of reading that editorial, Weston was immersed in the idea of helping. She arranged a meeting with Dr. John Galgiani, director of the VFCE; Dr. Steven Oscherwitz, an infectious disease specialist in Tempe, Cosby and organizers of the **Valley Fever Alliance's** Nov. 1 fundraising walk to be held in downtown Phoenix .

Though the editorial was a catalyst for her action, Weston's daughter-in-law, Arlene Trout, had already given her connection to Valley Fever. "(Valley Fever) ruined my life," Trout, 46, said. "I can't do anything. I'm so limited in what I can do. It wouldn't be so bad if it was just the valley fever, but with the diabetes, osteoporosis and neuropathy, I can't do anything. I haven't been able to work since 2005."



Weldon B. Johnson, The Arizona Republic

Arlene Trout (left) and her mother-in-law Lois Weston are trying to raise money and awareness for valley fever research. Trout suffers from valley fever in addition to diabetes and cancer.

MORE ON THIS TOPIC

For more information about the Valley Fever Center for Excellence, including how to donate:

www.vfce.arizona.edu or 520-626-6517.

The Valley Fever Alliance's inaugural Walk to Save Lives takes place Nov. 1 starting at the UA medical center in downtown Phoenix. Entry fee is \$20 (\$25 after Oct. 15). For more information:

sites.google.com/site/2009walkforvalleyfever/Home or 520-626-6517.

About valley fever

Valley fever (coccidioidomycosis) is contracted by breathing tiny spores released from the dry desert soil into the air. It doesn't spread from person-to-person and is relatively unknown outside of the Southwest. Approximately 150,000 cases of valley fever occur in the United States each year with about 60 percent of those cases developing in Arizona. About 30,000 Arizonans are infected each year with a small number (36 in 2007) of those cases being fatal. Animals, especially dogs, are at risk for the disease as well.