

Couple delivers a 'counter punch' to MS



Stephen and Julie Hare found a unique way to turn their adversity into opportunity.

by Kelly Smith

Just a few years ago, Stephen and Julie Hare were enjoying a comfortable life in Northern California. She was a schoolteacher, and he was in management at a Napa Valley winery.

Then, one day, Julie began experiencing tingling and hypersensitivity on her left side, and subsequently developed difficulty walking. After a number of tests and visits to the doctor, Julie was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. It was the summer of 2009, and the country was in a recession. Just a few weeks earlier, she had been laid off from her teaching position due to budget cuts. Then, shortly after her diagnosis, Stephen learned that his management position had been eliminated.



COUNTER PUNCH
2009
RUTHERFORD · NAPA VALLEY
CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Photo courtesy of Counter

Punch Wines

It was, understandably, a difficult time for the couple. Julie sought out support from friends and family, as well as from the National MS Society. There, she tapped into a variety of resources to help her adapt. Perhaps most importantly, she connected with people like herself who were living with MS and heard their stories. So, after she put the disease into perspective, Julie found herself looking for ways to give back.

One November night just before Thanksgiving, she and Stephen attended “The Art of Living” support group at the MS Center at University of California, San Francisco, and that’s when everything changed. “Almost everyone in the room had MS, and they were all talking about what they were thankful for, in keeping with the topic of gratitude,” says Stephen. “I was feeling a little sorry for myself, and having a hard time with it.” Later that night, as the couple reflected on the turn of events in their lives, a photo hanging on their wall caught their attention. It was a playful, loving picture of Stephen’s maternal grandparents, with his grandfather in a boxing pose, and his grandmother looking on with a smile. “The photo helped us realize we might be able to tap into our love for each other and find our gratitude together,” Julie relates.

The giving vines

They decided to combine Stephen’s passion for and knowledge of the California wine industry with Julie’s growing mission to give something back to the MS movement, and came up with the idea for Counter Punch Wines. “We did some due diligence, went through the permit process and opened for business in September 2012,” says Stephen. The couple created a label for red and white wines produced in California grape-growing regions, and they donate 10 percent of proceeds to the Society to “counter punch” the effects of MS. The photo? It’s now the art for their wine label.

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Down the road, they intend to purchase a vineyard. “There’s a phrase in the wine industry,” Stephen notes, laughing. “How do you make a small fortune in the wine industry? Invest a large fortune.” Julie and Stephen also sponsor and participate in a Walk MS team called appropriately enough, Counter Punch.

“Julie and Stephen Hare are extraordinary people,” says Ann Johnson, community development manager for the Society in Northern California, who worked with the Hares to

kick start their Walk MS Santa Rosa Counter Punch team. Counter Punch Wines has also been a presence at Waves to Wine Bike MS event. “You can see the passion they have about increasing MS awareness. Stephen wants to get others in the wine industry involved to build a collaborative that adds to their fundraising efforts.”

Johnson has been personally inspired by the couple’s attitude. “They have committed to embracing the joy of life, and it’s kept them connected and united. It’s about giving back to the organizations that have helped them so much in living with MS. With Counter Punch Wines, they couldn’t find a better way to do that. They are serving as a role model for the local community.”

A new direction

Counter Punch Wines gave Julie a new perspective after her diagnosis. “I don’t want to understate what this growth process has done for me,” she says. “It helped me move in the direction of accepting my diagnosis, and moving beyond it. I was turned upside down when this started; I didn’t realize I could turn it back over.”

The couple’s relationship has moved into a different place as well: “I was very embarrassed by my illness,” Julie explains.

“Stephen’s been very patient, waiting for me to move through that. For whatever mysterious reasons, this process has brought us closer together.

“It’s easy to get distracted by the disease, and stray off the path,” Julie adds. “It’s very easy to turn inward, be consumed by all that MS has taken away from me and what it’s changing in my life. Counter Punch Wines took me out of myself. It’s become larger than us.”

Kelly Smith is a Colorado journalist and freelance writer whose work has appeared in many local and national publications.