

Trek to Navajo White House Ruins Crosses Cultural Divide

# ARIZONA HIGHWAYS

MAY 2006

The Old Man and  
the Canyon

Walking the Rim  
Seeking a Cure

Top Out in  
the Land of the  
Ladybugs

10 most scenic trails  
take a hike!

\$3.99 US/\$4.99 CAN

05 >



75470108060

# Hike the Rim of hope

by LEO W. BANKS

A terrible day leads to  
a beautiful place  
to fight leukemia

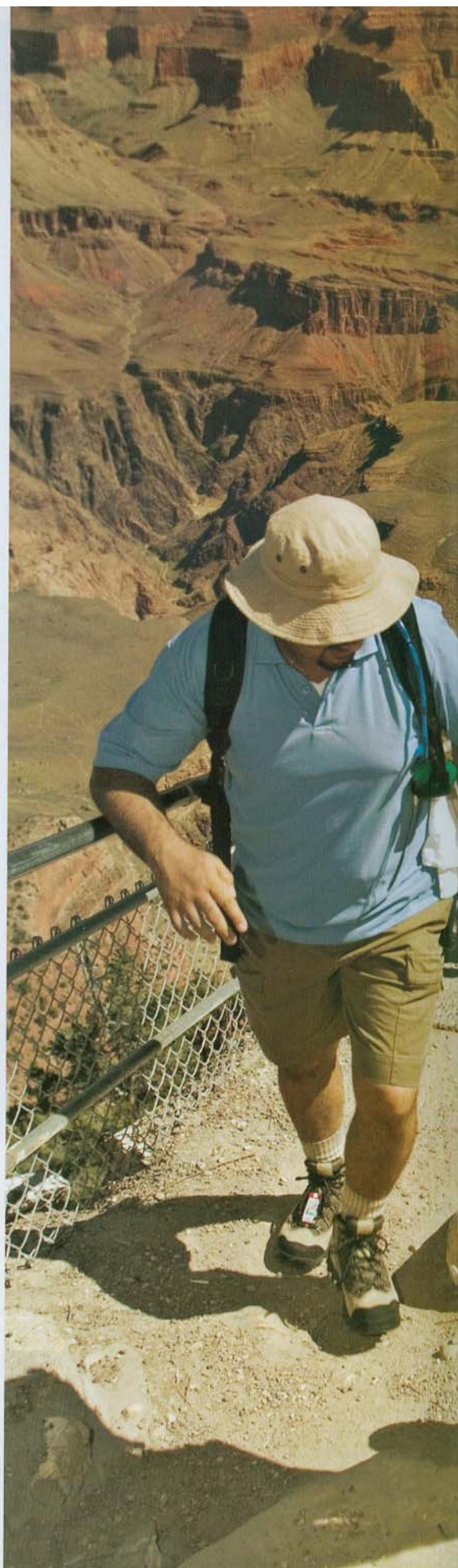
THE WORST DAY OF HIS LIFE led Alex Vargas Sr. to the most beautiful place on Earth. How he got to the Grand Canyon is a story of love and hope that has helped bring the entire Vargas family back to the eternal value of doing for others.

On that terrible day, October 30, 2004, doctors informed Alex and wife, Glorimary, that their then 13-year-old son, Alex Jr., had leukemia. For four months, he'd suffered pain in his hips that a string of doctors couldn't explain. At the end of her patience, Glorimary took Alex to the hospital where a doctor admitted the boy, and said he wouldn't release him until the problem had been diagnosed.

So Glorimary drove home to pack a suitcase, and while there, the doctor called with the results of Alex's blood tests.

"He started talking about white blood cell

photographs by DON B. and RYAN STEVENSON





counts and red blood cell counts, and I knew," says Glorimary, whose father had died of cancer in 1990, at the age of 45. "I just collapsed on the kitchen floor and started crying."

The news hit Alex Sr. hard, too. "It's like you're standing in the middle of the railroad tracks, and you see this train coming, and you can't move," says the 36-year-old father of three, a regional accounts manager for the Qwest phone company.

After briefly wondering why it had to happen to their son, the Vargases, of Chandler, got down to business. They began working the phones, doing research and educating themselves about chronic myelogenous leukemia, a form of the disease so rare in children that it occurs in only 2 to 4 percent of all childhood leukemia cases.

They even organized large bone marrow drives in Florida and Puerto Rico, where Glorimary grew up.

Those efforts, in turn, led them to The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's innovative new fundraising program called Hike for Discovery, and that led Alex to the Rim of the Grand Canyon on a brilliant morning in May.

"Glorimary and I decided that the guy upstairs gave us this bump in the road for a reason, and it was to show us that we should help others, not just our son," says Alex, gazing into the great gorge from Mather Point. "That's why I'm here, and it feels really good to me. It feels like a mission accomplished."

The Hike for Discovery got its start in the winter of 2003. The idea's creators, Gene Taylor and his wife, Jo Ann, were walking out of the Canyon along Hermit Trail late one afternoon when they began talking about finding a way to use their knowledge, and the Canyon, to raise money for cancer research.

The Taylors operate a company called The Walking Connection, which organizes hiking adventures around the world.

The couple reached Hermit's Rest and looked back at where they'd been, admiring the sunset, the color and the majesty, and the idea quickly took shape in their minds.

"We decided to utilize our walking program and the magnificence of Arizona to raise money in a way that had never been done before," says Taylor. "The Canyon provided the inspiration, and we basically put together the whole program while sitting there."

Within six months, they were in partnership with the society, which began organizing last year's inaugural hike. The event drew 237 par-

#### Heartfelt Hike

Alex Vargas, second in line, hits the trail at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon along with other Hike for Discovery participants, who each raised a minimum of \$2,500. Proceeds from the hike support The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's cancer research.

ticipants from five of the society's chapters nationwide.

Each person raised at least \$2,500—or \$3,500 for those from chapters outside Arizona—by whatever means they chose. Their methods included fund-raising letters, phone-call appeals or putting on varied events such as charity softball games.

Those who raised the requisite amount, and engaged in a society-sponsored 15-week physical fitness training in preparation, were rewarded with the adventure of a lifetime, a hike into the Canyon or along its Rim, organized and guided by The Walking Connection.

Last year's hike grossed \$975,000. This year, the society expects to raise \$1.5 million with 700 to 800 hikers taking to the Canyon trail during four weekends in April and May.

"The 'Discovery' part of the title means that we're donating all the money to help discover cures for leukemia, lymphoma and other blood-related cancers," says Kate Giblin, the society's national campaign director. A grant from the society helped fund the research for a new leukemia drug called Gleevec. Alex Vargas Jr. takes Gleevec.

But the hike's benefits go beyond money raised. It brings together people who've lived with struggle, heartbreak and in some cases, painful loss. Yet each still finds the time and the will to press on toward a cure.

Javier Zuluaga got involved in the Hike for Discovery in the name of Michael Drake, his former football coach at the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland.

Zuluaga and his wife, Gina, raised \$10,200 in Drake's name, the highest amount for the society's Desert Mountain Chapter, based in Phoenix.

"He was there so much for me at the academy, and I wanted to be there for him when he was going through a tough time," says Zuluaga, 34, who works at Security Title in Phoenix. "I was proud to have him as a coach then, and I'm proud to have him as a friend now."

Even though battling non-Hodgkins lymphoma, Drake, still in his 40s, planned to attend last year's hike with his wife and daughters. But the cancer attacked his brain and he couldn't travel, leaving his doctors no option but to treat symptoms.

Anticipating his good friend's death pained Zuluaga. But coming to the Grand Canyon helped fill his heart with gladness, too.

"I'm going to contemplate some of the good things Coach Drake did in people's lives," says Zuluaga. "Coach would want that. He was such a positive person, so low-

key and humble. It really touched him that so many people came together for him."

Virtually all the hikers tell similar stories—how the terror of cancer, either theirs or a loved one's, brought clarity to their lives, helping them understand what's most important.

Eileen Bobrow, a 63-year-old teacher and family therapist from the society's Palo Alto, California, chapter, stood at the Canyon Rim as a Hike Hero, so called by organizers because she has cancer and decided to hike in spite of it.

In fact, she underwent chemotherapy a few days before suiting up with her walking sticks, sun hat and sunscreen. Cat Hicks, 29, also from Silicon Valley, called Bobrow an inspiration to everyone.

"Can you imagine coming out here to hike after chemotherapy?" asks Hicks, who joined the Grand Canyon adventure for her goddaughter, suffering from acute lymphocytic leukemia. "It makes you realize that what you're going through in your own life isn't as drastic as you think."

Lives changed.

Lessons learned.

For Alex Vargas Jr., a handsome, shaggy-haired teen, there have been many lessons. He learned, for example, that his little brother, Sal, loves him a whole bunch.

When the diagnosis came, Sal, then 9, thought he might lose his brother, and didn't want to leave him behind in the hospital. And when Alex Jr. came home, Sal slept in the same bed with his big brother to keep him close.

Throughout his month-long stay at Phoenix Children's Hospital, during which he celebrated his 14th birthday, Alex Jr.'s Bible study group moved their meetings to his room. And his friends, frequent visitors, said that if he lost his hair, they'd all shave their heads, too.

These displays of love and support affected Alex Jr. deeply, sparking a change in his life-long plans. He said he always wanted to design cars for Ford or General Motors when he grew up. But his battle with leukemia changed his mind.

Now Alex wants to become an oncologist. As the brave youngster told his mom, "Who better to care for these patients than me." ■

*Tucson-based Leo W. Banks used his time hiking at the Canyon with Alex Vargas Sr. to rediscover life's eternal verities.*

*Father-and-son team Don B. and Ryan Stevenson of Tempe worked together on this intensely moving project. Both came away with a profound sense of love and deep respect for the patients and the hiker-supporters.*

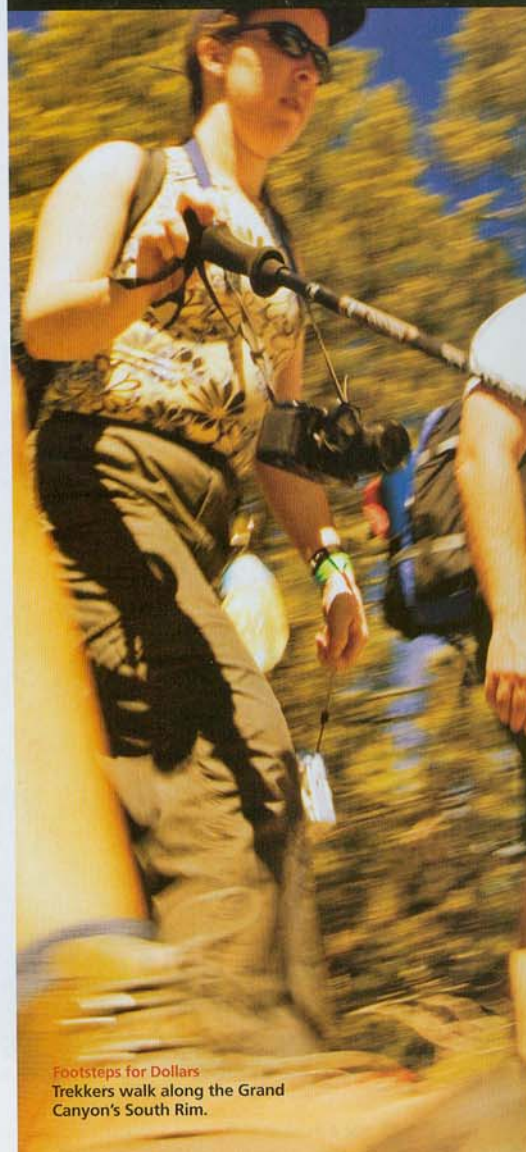
# Hike for Discovery

## at the Grand Canyon

An adventure-style fund-raising program that actually trains participants to hike the famed chasm raised \$975,000 last year for The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society. This year's spring hike is scheduled for May 5-7, and The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society has opened the

program to 23 chapters nationwide in addition to the Phoenix chapter. Preparations for a fall hike gear up this August.

Hikers or sponsors should contact hike coordinator Lisa Bisciglia, (602) 788-8622, extension 13, or [bisciglia@lls.org](mailto:bisciglia@lls.org) for details. To support Hike For Discovery online, go to [www.hikefordiscovery.org/dm](http://www.hikefordiscovery.org/dm). You can select a hiker to sponsor from the Desert Mountain States Chapter and make an online donation.



Footsteps for Dollars  
Trekking along the Grand Canyon's South Rim.