

J. Ben Velasquez

Jimmie Heuga Award 2004

Citation: Ben Velasquez is no stranger to performing selfless acts. He cared for his first wife through several years of illness as a diabetic, through a kidney transplant, a debilitating stroke, and eventually death.



For his first wife, he was not a match to donate her a kidney. So, when he heard a fellow ski club officer and co-worker, Angela Davis-Brewer, was in desperate need of a liver donor, he didn't hesitate to offer his own. He underwent a battery of tests for compatibility and strength. This time, Ben turned out to be a good match. He met all the criteria: Younger than 55, in good health, and he felt a bond with Angela.

At age 50, Ben first strapped on a pair of skis so he could learn this new sport. With some lessons, determination and encouragement from his current wife, Elaine Cobos, Arizona Ski Council President, he was skiing down the Telluride Resort's Black diamond run, "the Plunge" at the end of his first ski season, along with the Arizona gang at "Surf the Rockies." Angela was enthusiastically just behind, but on a snowboard.

Even a torn ACL a month before his second wedding only slowed Ben down slightly. He had replacement surgery almost immediately and worked diligently on his Physical Therapy to be back out on the slopes again the following season. That was the year that Angela came on the Telluride early season "Arizona Days" trip at 7 months pregnant, only to lose the baby two weeks before delivery, prompting the tests that would identify her Hepatitis C issues (from a blood transfusion as a premature baby) and immediate need for a new liver. Ben and Angela had transplant surgery and created their unbreakable bond on September 29, 2003.

Both donor and recipient are doing fine and ever returned to the slopes for the annual trip to Telluride December 11- 14, 2003. It was the 25th anniversary of this trip, and Ben and Angela were the 25th live liver donation surgery performed by Phoenix's Mayo Clinic Hospital since it began the procedure in 2001. Michael Brewer, Angela's husband, says, "Ben is a hero in the true sense; he's a person who put himself in harm's way for another human being and in keeping with his humble nature, doesn't want any special recognition."