



The Path to Hope

Nationally recognized healthcare leader Annette M. Walker believes in changing perspective, preparing for the downhill, and always finding the way to hope.

Annette Walker, president of City of Hope Orange County, has mentored and sponsored hundreds of women. She considers it a privilege and a responsibility to guide the next generation of leaders. A lifelong learner, Walker says that people with cancer and a life-changing experience in Spain taught her a lot about her journey.

"Allie, who is recovering from cancer, expressed it this way," Walker says. "She said, 'When you are told you have cancer, everything changes in an instant. The ground under your feet is no longer solid and feels like it is moving. So many things you took for granted suddenly vanish.'"

Walker reports that Allie, like many people with cancer, found her way to positivity and hope. "She made me think about what hope is and does," says Walker. "It's that distant point that calls you. It keeps us moving, even in uncertainty."

Walker knows all too well about moving forward in uncertainty. She recently led her team to open the most advanced comprehensive

cancer center in the nation's sixth-largest county. City of Hope Orange County Lennar Foundation Cancer Center in Irvine was designed and built during a pandemic, but Walker ensured it opened on time and under budget. The cancer center delivers world-renowned treatment, research, and cancer cures to Orange County's 3.2 million people. It will be seamlessly connected to Orange County's only cancer hospital, currently under construction and opening in 2025.

TALES FROM THE CAMINO: KNOW WHERE TO FOCUS

Walker's big role at City of Hope Orange County clearly requires focus, stamina, and the ability to navigate the unexpected. Traveling the 220-mile Camino de Santiago also taught Walker about uncertainty and ultimately finding one's way. The Camino is an ancient pilgrimage route through Spain requiring physical and spiritual stamina. Although busy with family and work, Walker and her husband left their routine to take a breath and gain a new perspective on their faith and fortitude. "I believe in callings," she says. "We were called to the Camino. I was certain of it."

The winding Camino is not for the faint-hearted. Guides warn that preparation is imperative. With her tremendous confidence and drive, Walker pushed herself and trained for months. She paid attention to the uphill elements of the trail because she believed this part would be the most difficult, and she didn't want to slow down her group by lagging.

As life would have it, the Camino's uphill portions proved easy. However, it was the downhill that caught her off guard. Walker was uncharacteristically unprepared when confronted with the steep downhill terrain layered with slippery shale. It was a dangerous situation that could have easily spun out of control had she not courageously stepped through the uncertainty.

"My team still hears about the shale to this day," Walker laughs. "Life is full of uphills and downhills, and sometimes those downhills can take you off guard—like when we built a cancer center amidst the supply chain problems of the pandemic. Those were big pieces of metaphoric shale that might have derailed the whole project had we not been certain of our destination."



LIFE'S A TREK: DON'T BE WEIGHED DOWN

Walker also has sage advice about what people pack for their lifelong journey. Remembering the Camino experience, she says, "When you're shouldering a backpack for 20 miles, you're acutely aware of what you carry."

Not surprisingly, the good choices came from helping others. While on the Camino, Walker and her husband carried the prayers and intentions of friends and families, which they promised to deliver to the tomb of the Apostle St. James at the journey's end, just as pilgrims have done for ages. These messages, often in the form of printed emails, were an honor and never a burden. "Their hopes and aspirations uplifted me," she says.

But marching through rough roads also elicited insights on what one shouldn't carry. "I thought about the emotions that weigh people down, sometimes for decades—fear of failure, resentment, blame, and excuses. You can't carry these around for the long term. They don't seem that heavy at first. However, if you carry them around for a while, you won't make your destination."

CHOOSING COURAGE

Walker often tells those she mentors that how you respond to challenges will define the difference between success and getting by. She says she will always choose courage and confidence as the way forward. It propelled her on the Camino and in her work at several high-profile health systems.

"I truly believe that we overestimate the cost of failing and underestimate the cost of not trying. Having courage does not mean you are not afraid. It means you are afraid, and you do it anyway. Ultimately, you have hope," she says.

LESSONS TO LEAD BY

Walker says that she has two anchors that keep her steady—faith and family. She encourages people to find their anchors, especially during life's turbulence.

For life's long journey, she advises others to think about what they are packing.

Walker has this advice for these rapidly changing times:

- Commit to getting a new perspective from time to time. Celebrate the peaks, and appreciate how far you have come.
- Be ready for the downhill when the ground shifts. Know how to stay steady.
- Pack for the long haul with the things that uplift you. Don't carry unnecessary baggage that will distract you from enjoying the journey.
- Find your anchors. They keep you steady and give you hope.



We all need something to steady ourselves when we're on the downhill, facing a challenge, or fending off the naysayers and negativity. I could not imagine taking this life journey without my family, my faith, and the enduring power of hope.

—Annette M. Walker, President,
City of Hope Orange County

CONTINUALLY LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Of course, none of this is easy, and there will be setbacks along the way. Walker says these setbacks teach us more than accolades ever will. For this, she again goes back to what patients with cancer have taught her.

"For me, Allie underscored that we cannot always control what happens to us," Walker says, speaking of the inspirational patient. "However, we can gather our courage, assess the situation, remain hopeful, and readjust. Hope is powerful. It steadies us when we're on the downhill, facing a challenge, or fending off the naysayers and negativity. I could not imagine taking this life journey without my family, my faith, and the enduring power of hope. It's what shaped me and made my life immensely exciting and fulfilling."

