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Miami attorney David Podein triumphs with fellow cancer survivors on Alaskan mountain range

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SPECIAL to The Florida Law Journal – MIAMI — While some lawyers enjoy relaxing at a beach or resort for their vacations away from the office, David Podein had something different – and much colder – in mind.

He'd already had a work-filled summer that included a professional triumph in which he prevailed in a 10-day construction arbitration. But he followed that with a quiet personal victory, when he embarked on a six-day mountaineering expedition on the Coffee Glacier in the Alaskan Mountain Range with five fellow cancer survivors.

During his second year at the University of Miami School of Law, Podein was diagnosed with cancer. He withdrew from class and moved back home to Michigan so his parents could help with his medical care as he underwent three months of rigorous chemotherapy treatment.

Now a proud cancer survivor more than five years, Podein lives in Miami and is an associate at The Law Office of David B. Haber, P.A., where he focuses his practice on complex commercial litigation, real estate/construction litigation, and commercial real estate transactions.

But his cancer experience is always with him, and it's remained an important part of his life.

"Outside of my practice, the majority of my time is focused on supporting and participating in cancer-related causes," he said. This interest helped lead him to First Descents, a non-profit organization that provides outdoor adventures for adults ages 18 to 39 who are survivors of cancer, or still fighting the disease.

The original First Descents trip took place in 2001, when 10 cancer survivors hit the rivers of Colorado in whitewater kayaks led by professional kayaker Brad Ludden, who was just 20 at the time. Ludden founded First Descents after his aunt was diagnosed with breast cancer and is currently the non-profit's chief executive.

The Alaska expedition was organized by First Descents, and it was a life-changer for Podein and the five other young adult cancer survivors. Members of the group had to build their own base camp, prepare their own meals, ice climb, and successfully complete crevasse-rescue simulations.

“The expedition forced us to really challenge ourselves by getting way outside of our comfort zone both physically and mentally,” Podein said.

Those challenges began even before the six arrived at Coffee Glacier. Before boarding the single engine plane that would drop the campers off directly on the glacier, the group was told that the last expedition had been stuck out there for an extra five days because of severe weather.

“That warning really made me thankful that our firm is a team and our other lawyers would be able to address anything that came up while I was still on the Mountain,” Podein said. “With no access to cell phones or e-mail, the only contact the group had with the outside world was a satellite phone for emergencies.

Podein, 29, said the experience helped him gain a new perspective.

“First Descents has helped me appreciate the positive aspects of my cancer experience and apply these lessons to my everyday life,” he said.

In fact, Podein is now “paying it forward” so that others can benefit. He’s been fundraising on behalf of First Descents to help send at least two new cancer survivors or fighters on their first FD trip.

For additional information on First Descents, please visit <http://www.firstdescents.org/about-us>