California’s wine country is one steeped in a heritage as rich as its soil and as sweet as its grapes. The culture of the region has enamored wine enthusiasts from around the world year after year, calling to those with a nose for the finer things in life.

This year, on Friday, August 7, a celebration will begin in this acclaimed region of the country. Throughout the day, hundreds of people will descend on America’s beloved Napa Valley to start the jubilant fundraising weekend, filled with family and friends with a passion for life, love, fine wine, and cancer research. The lobby at the Villagio Inn & Spa will transform into the unofficial party headquarters for the weekend, with revelers enjoying the DJ, dancing, and drinks as they reunite with familiar faces from years past. After two days of educational seminars, the attendees will gather together at the wine estate of Nickel & Nickel, where the bucolic space between the old barn and the new barrel chai will be transformed into an elegant entertainment venue fit for the finest of fundraising galas.

This event is the 11th annual V Foundation Wine Celebration, which raises money to support cancer research in honor of college basketball legend and ESPN commentator, Jimmy Valvano.

While the first gala dinner for the V Foundation Wine Celebration took place in 1998 at the former Coppola estate (now Rubicon), since 2004 Beth Nickel has taken on the role of gracious and beloved hostess for the event at Nickel & Nickel, one of the four wineries in which she is a partner. Beth’s own story with cancer is, as all are, a touching one that still pulls on the heartstrings of everyone who knows her. Her husband, Gil Nickel, passed away in 2003 due to an aggressive form of melanoma. Just three months before his death, despite being gravely ill, Gil made his final public appearance at the Wine Celebration’s signature Saturday night party. “Gil got up to the microphone, thanked everyone for what they were doing for cancer research, and said, ‘It is going to be too late for me, but not too late for people down the road, thanks to you guys.’ He encouraged the audience to do what they love, do it with passion, and do it now,” explains Beth. “He commanded them to do whatever it took to live a fulfilled and happy life. He got a standing ovation that night and kind of went out with a bang, if you will.”

Bob Lloyd, Jim Valvano’s teammate and roommate, and chairman of both the V Foundation and the Wine Celebration, commented, “I don’t think I’d ever heard anyone speak so directly to the very core of what Jim believed. Gil Nickel stood up there and said, ‘Enjoy your life.’ The room was pumped and full of inspiration, and since that day the entire Nickel & Nickel team have been a part of the V Family.”

The Nickel & Nickel team is comprised of Larry Maguire, Dirk Hampson, Gil’s son Jeremy Nickel, their nephew Erik Nickel, with Beth as partner and proprietress. But Nickel & Nickel is not their only wine country baby. They also operate Dolce, which produces a Napa Valley late harvest wine; En Route, a pinot noir from northern California’s Russian River Valley (their latest release for 2009); and Far Niente, which makes Napa Valley estate chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon (the oldest of the family’s “children”). Beth and Gil first discovered Far Niente on a scouting trip to the region in the 1970s. Though their own storybook romance began on the farmlands of Oklahoma, the magnetic attraction that emanates from the California wine country called to the couple, and they set out on an adventure west to try their hand at winemaking. Armed with an in-depth knowledge of all things botanical (both grew up in family-owned nurseries), they came to Napa Valley with the dream of creating a world-class wine estate.
“We looked at wineries that were working as well as properties that had not yet been planted,” says Beth, explaining that they constantly revised and fine-tuned their plans and needs throughout their two-year search. They came across an abandoned, gingery stone building in Oakville, and where many would see a crumbling building and not be drawn to it, the Nickels saw promise. “We loved old buildings that were of historic significance, although we had never tackled a big restoration project like that. But part of Gil’s genius was that he was a real visionary,” says Beth. With that mission unarguably accomplished, the Nickels set out to tackle new vintner challenges, and after introducing Dolce in 1992, introduced the first Nickel & Nickel single vineyard varietals—four cabernets, one merlot, and one zinfandel—in 2000. “Where Far Niente’s different blends could be the spirited live auction to the world-class performance by The Pointer Sisters, Nickels once again put their magic touch on a dilapidated structure, and now it is the permanent home of the Saturday evening benefit. Bob Lloyd explained why. “With cancer, it’s personal. This is a gathering of friends and family, united in a singular mission—and what better place to do that than in the verdant, family room of dear friends. And what a setting it is,” Lloyd says, explaining that Gil’s prized car collection always lines the west side of the tents as a gentle nod to his presence. Lloyd—by all who knew or encountered him.”

Julie Constantin, cofounder of the Wine Celebration, commented on the impact of Beth’s efforts year after year. “From the get-go, Beth touched everyone with her calm and loving support of Gil throughout his illness. She has channeled her immense love for her husband into helping to create a gracious, personal event at her winery, and her efforts on behalf of skin cancer research will have a profound influence on the lives of so many people. She embodies the credo set forth by Jim Valvano: Don’t give up, never give up.”

This year, attendees at the Wine Celebration signature fundraising event will be thrilled to welcome back Mike Krzyzewski, better known as Coach K, head basketball coach of Duke University and coach of the 2008 Gold Medal U.S. Men’s Olympic team, along with his wife, Mickie, who will host the evening after a two-year hiatus while training for the Olympics. Coach K will be accompanied by a team of who’s who in the sports world, including the voice of Monday Night Football, Mike Tirico, and college and professional coaching phenom Louis Holt. From the spirited live auction to the world-class performance by The Pointer Sisters, the evening is sure to be a smashing success, both socially and financially. Last year’s celebration raised more than $3.3 million, and because the endowment is already fully funded, 100 percent of the proceeds from the fundraising weekend go directly to support cancer research.