

Ain't no mountain high enough to put this woman off

LIFE MADE her tough, but it didn't make her hard. Ann Hougham is open and friendly, with a warm smile and a ready laugh. From the beginning, it was clear she was a survivor. When she was 3 months old, her mother left her — just for a moment — in a bassinette on a second-story balcony, and Hougham promptly rocked herself right out of the bassinette and over the side, into a gutter below. Miraculously, she was uninjured. She remembers growing up in a little town in western New York called Mayville, where her father was a country doctor and her mother was a nurse. She was pretty self-reliant —

she said her mother would ask her and her sister if they wanted someone else to play with on the weekends, and while her sister always did, Hougham would wave her mom off with a breezy, “No, I'm all right.” The family moved to Napa in 1966, when Hougham was 12, so her dad could study to become a psychiatrist specializing in working with adolescents. Hougham graduated from Napa High School in 1972. She enrolled at U.C. Davis, where it took her five years to complete a bachelor's in environmental planning and management. She could have done it in four, but she discovered the ski slopes at Alpine Meadows. Not only did she become the first woman to work as a ski lift operator there, but she ended up taking off four winter quarters just to hang out, work and ski. After graduation in 1977, Hougham wanted hands-on experience with architecture and building. Women in construction were rare, but she met a builder named Billy Beckett who agreed to take her on. She became an apprentice carpenter and helped



design and build several homes. She also got a real estate license so she could negotiate the buying and selling of homes and lots. Somewhere along the way, she and Beckett fell in love, and in 1980, they were married. According to Hougham, it wasn't a particularly happy union, but she'd been taught that marriage was forever. She continued her apprenticeship, and by 1981, she designed and built a four-story



cliff house in her old stomping grounds at Alpine Meadows. While it was clear that Hougham was getting better and better at the building and real estate business, it was equally clear that her marriage was deteriorating.

Finally, 11 years after the wedding, she left, taking their two daughters with her. She'd befriended an

entrepreneur named Jake Hougham, and that friendship quickly blossomed into something more. She stuck by him through some of the lowest times in his life, both emotionally and financially. Together, they started the Great Northern Produce Company, based on a patent Jake had for a method of packaging lettuce. The Mills family — longtime farmers in Salinas — bought into the company and it quickly thrived. At about the same time, Jake sought treatment for what he thought was a stomach ulcer. It turned out to be colon cancer that required major surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. Somehow, Ann managed to handle the nuts and bolts of their business, while keeping up with his medical treatments. Jake's cancer went into remission, and in 1998, he and Ann married. He'd always wanted to live on a farm, and Ann heard about a place for sale on the Arroyo Seco River. Called Mesa del Sol, it had a history dating back to the early 1800s and although parts of it had seen

better days, the Houghams saw potential. They bought the property and set to work, including planting vineyards on the 14-acre property. Ann did all the design work, taking into account Mesa del Sol's history. They'd found what Jake called, "their secret garden," and they were busy, but happy. And deeply in love. Less than a year later, Jake's cancer returned. He soldiered on as if he were going to lead a long life, but in August 2000, as he and Ann discussed the vineyard, he said, "I don't think I'm going to live to see the first harvest." She said it was the first time he'd ever acknowledged that he was dying. October 2000, he died at Mesa del Sol. His ashes were spread over the vineyard. It would have been easy to walk away and let someone else finish the hard work of restoring the property, but that didn't happen. "It was something about my life purpose and why I was here," that kept her there, she said. "I wouldn't trade it for anything." She manages the vineyard with the help of a longtime ranch hand named Eduardo, and winemaker Ian Brand turns her grapes into Mesa del Sol wine, which is sold at local shops and restaurants, including Trio, La Balena and Sierra Mar. The estate is now fully restored, with a large swimming pool, a main house and two smaller cottages. Ann operates it as a vacation rental but still enjoys spending time there. Now Mesa del Sol is a place where joy flows freely, as families gather there for weddings and reunions. Ann loves to travel and hike, and in the last 10 years has reached the top of Mt. Whitney, as well as completing the 26-mile Inca Trail over the mountain passes in Peru to Machu Picchu. Her daughters are grown and accomplished in their own rights, and Ann is a proud grandmother of a boy and a girl. And of all of her achievements, that legacy may be the best.

By Elaine Hesser