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Turning Awareness into Action Against Breast Cancer

By: Susan Carey Dempsey

Throughout the month of October, we've seen every imaginable surface and venue swathed in pink, from athletes' shoes to snack foods to galas and fashions meant to raise awareness of breast cancer.

It reaches the point sometimes of overload, where we fear that the omnipresent pink bow may lose its effectiveness; or at least dilute the message.

To bring breast cancer awareness into focus, we thought we'd look at some of the people who came together on a particular project. United by a family's experience with breast cancer, each has found a way to play a role in advancing the progress of breast cancer research.

Dr. Larry Norton is a world-famous oncologist at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York. In addition to treating patients, he conducts research into the basic biology of cancer, the mathematics of tumor causation and growth, and the development of approaches to better diagnosis, prevention, and drug treatment of the disease. He's especially identified with the development of an approach to therapy called "dose density," or "sequential dose density." This is a new and more effective way of using anticancer drugs, based on a mathematical model he developed with colleagues, which maximizes the killing of cancer cells while minimizing toxicity.

onPhilanthropy asked Dr. Norton, who also speaks widely on breast cancer research, whether a clear message was getting through, or if "breast cancer awareness" had become too vague and generalized to have impact.

"Awareness is a very poor term" he said, in talking about breast cancer. "I'd rather talk about commitment. For a long time, we simply needed to bring the topic out into the open. You could not mention the word "breast" in mixed company, couldn't say it without inducing giggles, and cancer was certainly not openly talked about. Women would say, 'she had that operation,' and what they were talking about was a mutilating mastectomy. Today we have had tremendous advances in reconstruction, in breast conserving surgery."

"So there have certainly been advances in treatment and we've improved the cure rate, but we won't be happy until we have control of the problem. I'd like to encourage more commitment to definitive, scientific research, high quality laboratory research with clinical applications. Screening, early diagnosis, therapy, and preventive strategies have had a huge impact, but it's still critical that we understand the basic biology of these cancers."

At the other end of this equation was a 12 year-old girl whose mother, Lisa Abramson, was being treated for breast cancer by Dr. Norton. Shortly after Lisa was diagnosed three years ago, her



daughter Carly made a beaded key ring for her as a gift. It became so popular at Memorial Sloan-Kettering where Lisa went for treatment that, with the help of family and friends, Carly made and sold 700 similar key rings in the name of breast cancer research. By the end of 2007, Carly had raised \$10,000 for the hospital. Wanting to build on her efforts, her father, Andrew Abramson, created the Cure Breast Cancer Foundation. The Abramson family was all too aware of the devastating impact of breast cancer; Andrew's mother had died of the disease shortly before Lisa was diagnosed.

From grassroots fund raising with key ring sales, the foundation grew to include special events and corporate cause-related marketing. Wanting to be an active part of the effort to find a cure, Mr. Abramson enlisted several "partners" to sponsor events with the foundation, and his firm, Value Companies, a leading New Jersey real estate company, has been donating \$100 to the foundation for every rental lease signed at their rental communities during the month of October.

Since its inception in 2007, CBCF has raised in excess of \$1.3 million through events such as an annual golf tournament, now preparing for its third year, walk-a-thons and other fundraising activities. Fully 100% of net fundraising proceeds received by the foundation are donated to the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan to support the ground-breaking research being conducted there by Dr. Norton.

In terms of the type of research in which Dr. Morton's involved, we asked what sort of impact a foundation such as CBCF could have:

"Of course, it's always important to the patient to have a supportive family, but these people are really engaged." Dr. Norton said. They have a genuine interest in advances in breast cancer research beyond their own personal interest, as a way of helping the world. They're remarkably dedicated."

"These philanthropic funds can allow you to develop the preliminary data to apply for a larger federal grant," he explained. "The real beauty of philanthropic funds is they give you scientific freedom, the ability to follow a creative impulse. Grants from the federal government are very tied to specific aims, which is OK if you're pursuing them, but it's very hard if your imagination takes you in another direction."

Fortunately, Carly Abramson's creative impulse to lift her mother's spirits by fashioning a key ring has generated philanthropic support that translates into just this type of research. Awareness spurred action, and converting action into commitment can make a real difference in this fight.

