

LYMPHOMA SURVIVOR "RADIANT RACHELI" DISCUSSES HER JOURNEY FROM DIAGNOSIS TO PATIENT ADVOCATE

Racheli Alkobey Peltier says it's important to speak up for yourself if you feel something is wrong with your health. As a 21-year-old college student in Los Angeles, she started feeling tired and weak. Her doctors first thought she had bronchitis or a cold, but her symptoms wouldn't go away.

"When I found a lump in my neck one morning, I knew something was terribly wrong," said Peltier. She quickly made an appointment to see a specialist who took a biopsy and diagnosed Hodgkin lymphoma, a pernicious cancer of the white blood cells and lymph nodes. While lymphoma is a relatively rare condition, it can be deadly without proper diagnosis and appropriate treatment.

In May 2015, Racheli moved back to Miami and started treatment under the direction of James E. Hoffman, M.D., assistant professor of clinical medicine at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center. Board certified in both hematology and medical oncology, Hoffman sees patients in Sylvester's Miami and Deerfield Beach offices.

"I attacked the cancer in my mind every day, and my health care team was totally supportive... I really became part of the Sylvester family."

"Hodgkin lymphoma is a cancer that often affects young people at a time ripe with uncertainty and challenges," said Hoffman. "Racheli was a continuous source of inspiration for the entire medical staff and other patients in and outside of Sylvester. She encountered real adversity and turned tears and sadness to joy and optimism at every turn."

For the next nine months, Peltier went through 12 rounds of chemotherapy, includ-



Sylvester patient and cancer survivor Racheli Alkobey Peltier and James E. Hoffman, M.D., assistant professor of clinical medicine.

ing treatment for side effects from the potent medications. "I got to experience all the aspects of Sylvester's cancer care," she said. "What stays in my mind is the clinical expertise and deep compassion shown by Dr. Hoffman and the entire staff."

Peltier says her positive attitude makes a huge difference in her fight against lymphoma. "I attacked the cancer in my mind every day, and my health care team was totally supportive," she said. "I really became part of the Sylvester family."

After finishing her treatment, Peltier started to feel like herself again. A passionate advocate for cancer survivors posting photos and videos on social media as "Radiant Racheli," Peltier was a candidate for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's 2018 Woman of the Year award.

Last spring, she married her husband, Adam Peltier. While Hoffman was unable to attend, one of his nurses did attend her bridal shower in Miami. "I feel I have a great future ahead of me, thanks to Sylvester," she said. "I am so grateful for the treatment and support from my cancer care team."

To make an impact on the future of cancer research, you can make an online donation by visiting

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**THANK YOU FOR
YOUR GENEROSITY.**

A YOUNG MOTHER WITH PREGNANCY-RELATED CANCER RESPONDS TO NOVEL IMMUNOTHERAPY TREATMENT

Alessandra Valerio was on vacation in Montreal with her husband and 15-month-old son when a sharp, persistent pain in her side sent her to the emergency room. By the next day, she was in Miami discussing treatment for an aggressive, pregnancy-related tumor that had spread throughout her body.

"In that moment, I was so afraid," she says. "What was going to happen to me?"

Two rounds and a combination of five chemotherapy drugs did not slow the growth of Alessandra's cancer, placing her in the "chemo-resistant" category. "The cancer basically said, 'no matter what you throw at me, we're going to take over and do damage,'" says Brian M. Slomovitz, M.D., division chief of gynecologic oncology at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Just 26-years-old at the time of her diagnosis, Alessandra's thoughts turned to her young son. "I thought, 'If I die now, he's never going to remember me,'" she says.

The solution was held within a specific characteristic of her tumor that made it compatible with immunotherapy, which engages a patient's own immune system to recognize and attack cancer cells. Immunotherapy responds in the presence of a protein called PDL-1. Alessandra's tumor overexpressed PDL-1, which made her a good candidate for immunotherapy, also known as a checkpoint inhibitor.

"Before treating Alessandra, there were no reports in the literature at all of patients with malignant, chemo-resistant choriocarcinoma being treated with a checkpoint inhibitor," says Slomovitz. "After consulting with several experts in the field worldwide, we decided to give it a chance."

After one round of the immunotherapy treatment, Alessandra's tumor markers – the protein in the blood that indicates cancer – began to drop. After a second line of therapy, the imaging improved. "We treated her with this novel checkpoint inhibitor and it really changed the biology of the disease," says Slomovitz.

The treatment was working, all without the side effects Alessandra experienced during chemotherapy. She could exercise, care for her son, and participate in life as usual. "It was a miracle," she says.



From Left **Brian M. Slomovitz, M.D.**, division chief of gynecologic oncology, **Alessandra Valerio**, her husband, **Dr. Jorge Perez**, and their son, **Luis**

Because choriocarcinoma is a pregnancy-related cancer, it can be detected through the use of a simple pregnancy test in place of other imaging. Today, 14 months following her initial diagnosis, Alessandra is cancer free.

"It was the best decision to be treated here at Sylvester," says Alessandra, who is currently in medical school and enjoying life in South Florida with her son. "If just one woman can be saved with this treatment, it's worth it."

PATIENTS RAVE ABOUT LENNAR'S CARE AND CULTURE



Chris Loulan (in pink), director of perioperative services and members of Lennar's staff

Setting a new standard for personalized care is The Lennar Foundation Medical Center's goal, and the award, which Press Ganey bestows on health care organizations that reach the 95th percentile for patient experience in every quarter of a one-year

period, is solid evidence that the new center on the University of Miami's Coral Gables campus is meeting it.

"Since opening its doors in December 2016, The Lennar Foundation Medical Center has focused on delivering the highest level of personalized care for every patient," said Ben Riestra, MBA, Lennar's chief administrative officer. "We are revolutionizing how we deliver personalized health care."

From its soothing spa-like ambiance to its infection-resistant stainless steel operating suites, every detail of the five-story, 200,000-square-foot center was meticulously designed to provide a comforting environment for patients.

"It's all about the people," said Chris Loulan, executive director of perioperative services who raised a high bar when hiring the 95 staff members who accompany patients

on every step of their Lennar journey. "Not only were you screened for your experience, your expertise and your skillset, but you were screened for your attitude, your team approach, and how you communicate with other people. There was a cultural fit we were looking for at Lennar."

Credit for that culture, Loulan said, belongs to Riestra, whose charismatic and empowering leadership has enabled teamwork and communication to be as much a part of Lennar's building blocks as the piano music, floor-to-ceiling windows, and concierge-like services that, as some patients noted, imbue the medical center with the feel of a 5-star hotel.

"There are four words you'll never hear from this team: It's not my job," Loulan said, before spotting a paper coffee cup left behind in the reception area.

She pauses to pick it up and throw it away.

A NEW AGE OF HOPE IN LUNG CANCER TREATMENT

Immunotherapy and Targeted Agents Show Promise for Many Lung Cancer Patients

Traci Sherman was referred to an ophthalmologist when she started seeing black dots earlier this year, mistakenly thinking it was a torn retina or another problem with the anatomy of her eye. She soon learned the spots were the result of cancerous lesions on her brain. Those lesions, as well as additional tumors in her lymph and pelvic bone, were caused by cancer originating in her lungs.

"It was a shock," says Traci, who at the age of 52, felt healthy and strong and had no symptoms outside of the slight impairment of her vision. In the weeks following her diagnosis of Stage 4 metastatic lung cancer, Traci initiated treatment under the care of Gilberto de Lima Lopes Jr., M.D., MBA, FAMS at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, part of University of Miami Health System.

"Traci is the new face of lung cancer," says Lopes, who is among the top lung cancer researchers in the world. While the disease historically affected mostly white, male smokers, increasing numbers of women, non-smokers, and people of color are joining the ranks of those fighting the disease.

While lung cancer remains the largest cancer killer, there is positive news to share. New developments in screening and treatment of the disease have led to improved outcomes for many patients. "This is a brave new world," says Lopes.

Lopes attributes improvements in rates of lung cancer survivorship to new treatments including immunotherapies, which engage the body's own immune system to recognize



Gilberto de Lima Lopes Jr., M.D., MBA, FAMS

and attack cancer cells. "For patients with metastatic lung cancer, we would only see that about five to 10 percent of patients are alive five years later. We now have new studies suggesting that maybe 15 percent or more will be alive at five years, or may be cured," he says.

Seven months following treatment, Traci's scans appear clear of cancer. "What we're seeing with new, targeted treatments is that the immune system can fight the disease with a lot more efficacy, sometimes leading to a complete response as we've seen with Traci," says Lopes.

To help keep the cancer from returning in other areas of her body, Traci has begun receiving radiation treatments. But otherwise, she is living life as she normally would, working and spending time with her family, without any notable side effects.

"It is incredibly exciting for me that something on paper back in March that could have been a death sentence has given me life," says Traci. "I'm here to tell people you can be given a diagnosis of late-stage lung cancer, but it doesn't have to mean your life is over."

CANCER SURVIVORS STRUT THEIR STUFF AT CURE BY DESIGN SURVIVOR FASHION SHOW



Miami fashion shows aren't typically home to celebratory cheers and a few misty eyes. But the room was bursting with gratitude and hope when cancer survivors strutted and shimmed down the runway at the American Cancer Society's Cure by Design Survivor Fashion Show at Brickell City Centre this past November.

Presented by Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, the event highlighted the impact of Sylvester's survivorship program, which supports and guides cancer survivors and their families in the days and years following treatment. By turning the spotlight on strong and healthy survivors of different ages and backgrounds, Sylvester and the American Cancer Society celebrate their success stories and the robust research for a cure that makes it all possible.

Sylvester's director, Stephen D. Nimer, M.D., reminds us, "There's more than 15 million cancer survivors in the United States, and people are surviving because of the research."

SYLVESTER RESEARCHER RALLIES FOR INCREASED MEDICAL RESEARCH FUNDING



Barry I. Hudson, Ph.D., a researcher at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center and assistant professor of cell biology at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, attended the Rally for Medical Research held this fall in Washington, D.C. The event, organized by the American Association for Cancer Research, included more than 300 national organizations that came together to call on policymakers to provide additional funding for the National

Institutes of Health (NIH) and raise awareness about the importance of continued investment in medical research.

In addition to participating in the rally, Hudson attended a reception on Capitol Hill and met with policymakers, including former U.S. Reps. Illeana Ros-Lehtinen and Daniel Webster, former U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, and NIH Director Francis S. Collins, M.D., Ph.D.

Hudson said the aim of the meetings was to urge all members of Congress to complete work on the appropriations bill that covers the NIH budget, which included a Senate-passed funding level of \$39.1 billion (a \$2 billion increase) for the NIH.

“As scientists, we always talk about issues with the level of NIH funding, so this was an opportunity to do something about this,” Hudson said. “As advocates for breast cancer survivors, we had a chance to personally tell our representatives of the importance of funding scientific and health care research.”

NEW FACES AT SYLVESTER



FRANK J. PENEDO, PH.D.

An internationally recognized expert in cancer survivorship and psychosocial oncology, Frank J. Penedo, Ph.D. joined Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center on August 15 as associate director for cancer survivorship and translational behavioral research. Penedo will be a professor in the Department of Psychology, College of Arts and Sciences and will hold a joint appointment in the Department of Medicine, Division of Population Health and Computational Medicine, at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine.

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DOLPHINS CANCER CHALLENGE



APRIL 6, 2019

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The Dolphins Cancer Challenge (DCC) is a way for everyone to be a cancer fighter. One hundred percent of participant-raised funds helps the pursuit for the next breakthrough, the next discovery, the next cure at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center.

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