

Community for a Cure

Newsletter

Fall 2017

Event Spotlight: Cancer survivors celebrate health, hope at *Festival of Life*



Hundreds of cancer survivors, caregivers, friends and family members gathered June 3 on the USC Health Sciences Campus for the 27th annual *Festival of Life*, a yearly celebration of health and hope hosted by the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center.

The event serves as an opportunity for current and former cancer center patients to celebrate life with the physicians, nurses and staff who joined them on their journey through cancer treatment and recovery.

The USC brass band was on hand to provide entertainment and the event culminated with a ceremonial release of white doves.

The event also included remarks from several patient survivors including Joe Vega, a 10-year survivor of colon cancer.

“I’m blessed with love and care,” said Joe. “Hope has carried me forward through bad days and worse. The faith I held tight meant that tomorrow would be better, it has to be better, and it always was. I am privileged and passionate to share my feelings with you – my community: medical staff, family members, patients, the newly diagnosed and fellow survivors.”

Judy Stark, a 16-year melanoma survivor who has volunteered with the USC Norris cancer center for the last 12 years, also shared her story and read a powerful and inspiring poem that she wrote of what cancer cannot do.

“Cancer is so limited...it cannot cripple love, it cannot shatter hope, it cannot corrode faith...it cannot conquer the spirit,” Judy read.

The *Festival of Life* is traditionally held the day before National Cancer Survivors Day, which is the first Sunday in June.





Cancer Research Spotlight: Doctors perform the first robotic surgery to remove kidney cancer extending into the heart



Mark Cunningham and Inderbir Gill led the multidisciplinary team that performed the surgery. (Photos/Ricardo Carrasco and Van Urfalian)

A surgical team at Keck Medicine of USC pushed the boundaries of clinical care by performing the first-ever robotic, minimally invasive surgical removal of a stage IV tumor thrombus — the removal of a cancerous tumor in the kidney that extends into the heart.

The nearly 10-hour procedure required painstaking precision from three renowned surgeons, a critical care anesthesiologist and a radiologist. In doing the procedure, the team reduced the patient's risk of sudden death from the tumor breaking off into the heart and lungs.

Typically, the surgery for a stage IV tumor thrombus, or blood clot, is both traumatic and risky. It requires major surgery in which the patient's

chest and abdomen are opened completely. Several quarts of blood are needed for transfusion and patients have a 1 in 20 chance of dying during the procedure.

In this landmark first case, the use of robotic surgery techniques significantly reduced trauma to the patient and minimized blood loss by more than five-fold. By using small incisions, the patient's hospital stay was just six days, as opposed to the typical two to three weeks after open surgery. Overall recovery time was also reduced significantly. Such multidisciplinary collaboration lays the groundwork for using advanced technology to build higher standards of patient care, even in the most complex cases.

"This exciting feat promises to redefine the boundaries of what is surgically possible through skill, collaboration and technology," said Inderbir Gill, Distinguished Professor of Urology, founding executive director of the USC Institute of Urology and associate dean of clinical innovation at the Keck School of Medicine of USC. Gill led the multidisciplinary team that performed the surgery. "Our hope is that we can now propel the field at large to turn such futuristic robotic surgery into our present standard-of-care."

According to the American Cancer Society, there are approximately 64,000 new cases of kidney cancer diagnosed each year. Only a small fraction of those patients (about 10 percent) have cancer that spreads through the blood vessels without metastasizing to other organs. In a small portion of these patients, the kidney cancer advances all the way into the heart, often rather rapidly. While this is a relatively rare occurrence, this condition could result in sudden death at any time from fragments of the tumor breaking off into the heart and lungs, making surgery a necessity.

Thanks to donors like you, we are able to attract and retain the best doctors and invest in the latest technologies to meet and exceed the health care needs of the patients we serve.



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USC Norris Cancer Center Donor Spotlight: Gretchen Lawrie

“There was a personal touch in every step of the process... Never did I feel abandoned or judged.”



There's never a good time to get cancer, but Gretchen Lawrie's breast cancer diagnosis came at a particularly bad time. She had lost her job due to the economy and just two years prior, she had lost her husband to a stroke.

A tax attorney and faculty professor, Gretchen initially discovered her diagnosis at the Van Elslander Cancer Center in Detroit, Michigan. In her 40s and with no family history, the news was unexpected – she had stage III breast cancer. A job offer led her to make the move to Los Angeles, where she would continue her care at the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center.

“The USC Norris cancer center was my treatment choice because it is a part of a university research hospital,” said Gretchen. “It was important for me to be treated by physicians who were on top of the most cutting-edge research and clinical studies available.”

Gretchen immediately felt welcomed. Soon after contacting the cancer center, she had an appointment with one of our oncologists.

“My care team at the USC Norris cancer center gave me the hope and confidence I needed to fight my cancer,” said Gretchen. “There was a personal touch in every step of the process. From the staff, to my oncologist, to my reconstructive surgeon, they listened to me as a person first. Never did I feel abandoned or judged.”

Gretchen appreciated that her physicians gave her their most honest, expert opinions, and were thorough in their diagnosis and treatment. Their doing so helped her make the most informed decisions toward her care. Today, Gretchen is breast cancer free and grateful to the doctors and medical staff at the USC Norris cancer center for helping her get back to doing what she loves most: taking her two Corgis, Chaucer and Kipling, out for evening walks.

Because of the *personalized, compassionate* care she received, Gretchen was inspired to pay it forward. She recently included the USC Norris cancer center as a beneficiary in her estate, specifically designating her gift to go to the Adolescent and Young Adult Cancer Program (AYA@USC) – a multidisciplinary treatment and care program addressing the psychological, physical and social needs of cancer patients 15-39 years old.

“Giving to the AYA program was very personal to me,” says Gretchen. “I had a friend diagnosed with cancer in her 20s. She had her eggs preserved and was still able to have a baby afterward. I can relate to her even though I was diagnosed in my 40s. I want to play my part to make sure that other AYA patients receive the same type of care that my friend did. I wanted my contributions to go directly towards understanding their needs, and ultimately pioneering the studies and research needed to improve their survival rate.”

Gretchen's story of perseverance is one example of many found within our cancer center community. Her motivation to give back and help others is an inspiration to all of us here. With donors like you and Gretchen, we can continue carrying on our commitment to *make cancer a disease of the past*.

Are you interested in including the USC Norris cancer center in your estate plans or through a planned gift? Please contact Laura Asok at Laura.Asok@med.usc.edu or 323-865-0665 for more information.

Oatmeal with Chia and Flaxseeds

INGREDIENTS

- 1/3 cup rolled oats
- 1/2 cup milk or milk alternative
- 1/2 tablespoon chia seeds
- 1 tablespoon flaxseed meal
- 1 tablespoon nut butter
- Cinnamon, to taste
- Honey or agave nectar, to taste

DIRECTIONS

1. Using a microwave-safe bowl, add in the oats, milk and chia seeds.
2. Microwave on high for 3-4 minutes.
3. Add flaxseed meal, a little extra milk if you prefer, honey, cinnamon, and nut butter.

VARIATIONS

- Banana Berry:* Add 1/2 large banana and 1 handful frozen berries. Add walnuts for extra crunch.
- Chocolatier:* Add 1/2 tablespoon all-natural cocoa powder and 1 tablespoon dark chocolate chips.
- Tropical Sunrise:* Use coconut milk and add mango and pineapple pieces (dried, fresh or frozen).

At USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center, our volunteers are a precious resource

We rely on a warm and devoted team of volunteers to work directly with patients and their families during their treatments. Volunteers work in many aspects of the Center's operations, from the Gift Shop to the Concierge Desk. They are our ambassadors to the community.

If you are looking for the opportunity to give back to your community, become a USC Norris volunteer.

Your commitment of time can make a difference in the lives of our patients and their families.

Prospective volunteers, who are 18 years of age or older, are asked to complete a written application, as well as participate in a placement interview, health screening, and background check.

Volunteers will also be required to attend a [New Volunteer Training Day](#) orientation before beginning any assignment. The next training date is **November 3, 2017 from 9 am – 3:30 pm**.

For more information, please contact Alicia Syres, Director of Volunteer Services at (323) 865-3169 or alicia.syres@health.usc.edu.

USC Norris Comprehensive
Cancer Center

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**Our Mission is to make cancer
a disease of the past
by advancing and integrating research,
education, and personalized patient care.**