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Remembering Lung Cancer

BY LACEY MEYER

In September 2006, eight months after her mother died of lung cancer, Tracy Sestili, along with her husband and brother, co-founded The Beverly Fund in her honor. A nonprofit organization, the Beverly Fund (www.beverlyfund.org), is dedicated to lung cancer awareness and education as a priority, funding research, and providing accessible information and resources for patients and caregivers.

Sestili hopes to change the way people view the disease and help them understand that “just because you get lung cancer doesn’t mean that you necessarily brought it upon yourself.” She says the “life-altering” experience of her mother’s diagnosis prompted her to get involved as a lung cancer advocate.

She recalls a conversation with her mother where Sestili admitted she was angry at God for her mother’s lung cancer, but her mother, a smoker of nearly 50 years, placed the blame on herself. “I was a little angry about it,” Sestili says. “How could you blame the person that you love for getting something that’s going to kill them?”

All too often lung cancer patients blame themselves, and their loved ones accept that response, Sestili says, and as a result the lung cancer movement lacks the necessary advocate involvement to raise awareness about the disease.

“One of the things we try to highlight is that you don’t have to smoke to get lung cancer. It doesn’t discriminate.”

In addition to changing people’s views of lung cancer through education, Sestili also hopes increased understanding of the disease—about what causes lung cancer and how to prevent it—will, in turn, lead to increased funding for lung cancer research.

And at the International Early Lung Cancer Action Program’s annual conference in 2007, Sestili gave a presentation on lung cancer awareness and the necessity to educate the general public, as well as legislators, pharmaceutical companies, and the government about the disease in order to increase funding and donations for lung cancer research.

As the only non-medical person presenting a poster at the scientific meeting,

Sestili says, “it was an inspiring experience to see how many medical professionals were interested and believed in what I had to say. Some were surprised, but 100 percent all agreed that we need to educate and raise awareness first so that others will feel the need to make lung cancer a priority.”

Sestili more than surpassed her fundraising goal for The Beverly Fund’s “Remember November!” awareness campaign and raised \$9,000 with the organization’s annual event Kites for Cancer Awareness. And by raising money for the Stand Up to Cancer initiative, Sestili won the opportunity to participate in the celebrity phone bank for the September 5 televised SU2C event. “Not only was it an honor to be a part of history, it was truly an awe-inspiring occasion to see Hollywood band together for a cause near and dear to my heart.”

Sestili and her husband, Paul, say working together on The Beverly Fund has brought them closer together because of their shared common goal and objective to end lung cancer—both of their fathers are prostate cancer survivors and Sestili also lost her grandmother to lung cancer.

“Cancer is a disease that affects everyone, and when it happens to you directly, it truly inspires you to get involved,” Sestili says. “If my mother were here today, she’d be proud of all of our accomplishments and would support us 100 percent in our advocacy efforts. In the future, we plan to expand our community outreach and our overall awareness campaigns. We hope to make lung cancer a priority for everyone.