

'Ovations' event shows that science is always in style

Q: What do internationally known shoe designer Stuart Weitzman and Dana-Farber researchers have in common?

A: Institute Trustee Patty Franchi Flaherty, who brought the two together at the second "Ovations for the Cure" fashion luncheon on March 30 to benefit much-needed investigations into ovarian cancer, a disease that's experienced little change in its typically late-stage diagnosis in several decades.

"Ovations for the Cure is the first organization of its kind; most other ovarian cancer groups support a combination of advocacy and patient education, but generally don't directly fund research," explains Ursula Matulonis, MD, director of gynecologic oncology at DFCI and Flaherty's doctor. "The group has helped grow the translational research platform for ovarian cancer at Dana-Farber and has also been instrumental in building our tissue bank, which was in need of funding and is vital to this work on a national level."

The projected \$200,000 garnered from this year's luncheon will go to the Madeline Franchi Ovarian Cancer Research Fund and benefit three key areas: research to discover a reliable screening technique, improved and less toxic therapies, and a better understanding into the biology of ovarian cancer. The fund, established in 2004, is named in honor of Flaherty's mother, who died of the disease.

Flaherty started Ovations for the Cure last year. Her love of shoes inspired the inaugural fashion event, but it is her family's medical history that got her involved in the first place. Flaherty has lost two sisters to non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, and she is an eight-year survivor of Stage 3 ovarian cancer who is still in treatment for a recurrence of the disease.

From catwalk to lab room

The sold-out crowd for this year's event at the Westin Hotel in Waltham, Mass., was treated to a Garden of Eden-themed fashion show. Models wearing ankle-length wigs and nude-colored leotards focused the attention on Weitzman's 2007 footwear line and his first-ever bag collection. What struck the fancy of attendees, however, was the chance to contribute to a good cause: At least two new grants from this event's proceeds are expected to be awarded in May.

Currently, the Franchi fund is supporting three projects launched from gifts raised at the 2006 show, including research by Adam Clauss, PhD, of Medical Oncology, who is investigating whether ovarian cancer truly originates in the ovaries. Along with his colleagues Ronny Drapkin, MD, PhD, of DFCI and Chris

Crum, MD, of Brigham and Women's Hospital, he is exploring a theory that the cancer may in fact begin in the far end of the fallopian tubes.

"With other cancers, we know where the disease begins," explains Clauss. "That knowledge is important in discovering a biomarker. It gives us a starting point to look at."

Another award recipient is studying why ovarian cancer patients develop a resistance to the platinum-based drugs used to combat the disease. Geoff Girnun, PhD, of Cancer Biology has focused his research on PPARgamma, a nuclear hormone receptor that seems to know a way around drug resistance.

"A family of anti-diabetic drugs, which are relatively nontoxic, bind and activate PPARgamma," says Girnun. "When these drugs are combined with traditional ovarian cancer therapies, they appear to make the treatments more effective."

Anthony Letai, MD, PhD, meanwhile, is working with Medical Oncology colleague Nicole Carlson to investigate apoptosis, or "programmed cell death."

There are a variety of abnormal behaviors that should shut down a cell; cancer cells exhibit these behaviors yet survive. Through tests on cells obtained through the new tissue bank, Letai and Carlson have found that one way cancer cells evade apoptosis is by overproducing proteins, such as BCL2. If they can determine which cancer cells need it to survive, they can theoretically deprive them of the protein and kill the cancer cells.

"Without the tissue bank, my study would not be possible: There'd be little to test," says Letai, who, like the other researchers, is grateful that Ovations is making ovarian cancer research "fashionable." DS



DFCI Director of Gynecologic Oncology Ursula Matulonis (left) joins her patient – and event organizer – Patty Franchi Flaherty at the fashion show.