

Brody: Seeking hope after losing twice to a deadly cancer

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MY HUSBAND and my father looked so much the same when they died — so thin, jaundiced and terribly still in their light blue hospital gowns.

Both died of pancreatic cancer, my husband last December, my father in August. Just seven and a half months apart, less than the time it takes to make a baby. I hadn't nearly gotten hold of mourning Elliot when my father passed away — just two weeks after his diagnosis.

The two most important men in my life had so much in common. Both were funny, wise, affectionate, handsome and opinionated. Both had deep crinkly eyes. They disagreed about almost everything in politics but both loved me. I miss them beyond measure.

It's hard to believe I lost them both to the same insidious disease. Pancreatic cancer isn't as common as some cancers — about 42,500 Americans will find they have it this year — but it's one of the most lethal kinds. Only 5 percent of patients survive five years. Most die within a year. Only a few discover they have it soon enough for surgery because there's no routine way to detect it early.

Pancreatic cancer is the fourth-leading cause of cancer death but gets only 2 percent of the National Cancer Institute's research budget. It's hard to understand why. Maybe it's because it doesn't have a huge lobby group of survivors or celebrity spokesmen who live long enough to humanize the cause. Actor Patrick Swayze helped. So did Randy Pausch, whose "Last Lecture" inspired millions. Now that they're gone, the spotlight could easily fade.

That leaves it up to devastated families to push for more funding. Since 2003 the three Rubis sisters of Englewood Cliffs have organized "Run for George" to honor

their father, who died of pancreatic cancer at 63. A longtime member of the planning board, he could often be seen jogging through town to train for marathons.

Following in his footsteps

For five of the last six years, hundreds of people have followed in his footsteps on a cool November Sunday in a poignant outpouring of support. They've raised almost \$300,000 so far for pancreatic cancer research conducted at Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, a leader in the field.

The Rubis family couldn't host the run last year because one of the sisters, a 47-year-old mother of two, discovered through an annual mammogram that she had breast cancer. After a double mastectomy and chemotherapy, Sophia's fine and back organizing the 5K run/walk while tackling breast cancer fund-raisers as well.

"There are so many people who had breast cancer and advocated for it, and I'm the lucky recipient of all that," Sophia says. "I had all the tools I needed to fight my cancer. People with pancreatic cancer have nothing. It's so sad."

It's beyond painful to know that top scientists can't pursue valuable clues because they don't have the resources.

Dr. Ralph Hruban, director of the Sol Goldman Pancreatic Cancer Research Center at Johns Hopkins, says right now is a particularly important moment to contribute because last year scientists sequenced the pancreatic cancer genome.

"We gained some fundamental insights into pancreatic cancer and that has opened up so many promising new avenues for research," Hruban says. "We can honestly say this is an exciting time in the war against pancreatic cancer. The bang for the buck for investment now is huge."

Scientists are scrutinizing gene mutations to try to learn how pancreatic cancer spreads so fast and what can be done to curb it. Other critical work is also being sponsored by worthy non-profits like the Lustgarten Foundation for Pancreatic Cancer Research and Pancreatic Cancer Action Network.

This holiday season, I'll be giving them gifts on my relatives' behalf instead of buying cooking gadgets or video games that will be broken or forgotten in a flash.

As readers might remember from The Record's "Living with Cancer" series, my husband fought his illness with tremendous grace, grit and humor for almost 2½ years. I'm deeply grateful we had that time but can't help feeling cheated. He died at 57.

'So much I wanted to do'

"What makes me so sad," Elliot wrote me in a note a few months before he died, "is that there was so much I wanted to do with you, so many places I wanted us to see together. I wanted to see my kids happy with what they were doing in life."

Elliot won't get to see any of our five children get married, and he'll never hold a grandchild. It's almost the first anniversary of his death, but I still can't believe he's really gone.

All I can do is hope that with talent, persistence, luck and better financial support, researchers will soon find ways to spare other families this searing brand of loss.

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RUN FOR GEORGE

The Rubis sisters hope you'll join them for food, games and silent auctions starting at noon Sunday at 143 Charlotte Place, Englewood Cliffs. Donations are also being accepted. For more information, visit runforgeorge.com.

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