



A Labor of Love

After a recurrence of metastatic breast cancer in 2015, Sandy Cassanelli began to look for a charitable fund where she could channel her energy and emotion—and support. While researching online, she discovered the surprising statistics of how charities use their donations, and how so few dedicate 100% of their donations to their cause. According to CharityWatch.org, “The most highly efficient charities are able to spend 75% or more on programs,” leaving on average 25% of donations spent on general administration and expenses. Not one to sit on her hands, this disappointment quickly turned into inspiration, and Sandy launched her own fund that would directly support her oncologist and his breast cancer research.

The Cassanelli Family

At her next appointment with Eric P. Winer, MD, who was at the time was based at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Sandy posed the admittedly loaded question: “Can I do this for you—if I start a fund, can I contribute one hundred percent directly to your research?” From there, the Breast Friends Fund (BFF) was born. Its mission is to dedicate one hundred percent of every dollar raised to the metastatic breast cancer research led

by Dr. Winer, who is now Director of Yale Cancer Center and Physician-in-Chief of Smilow Cancer Network, and Sandy’s oncologist for the last seven years.

Starting a fund like the BFF, Sandy says, “has been a gift given to her to be able to do something.” She has met many fellow metastatic breast cancer (MBC) survivors who have become close friends—“her MBC sisters”—and she has lost many friends along the way as well. But establishing the fund and hosting events has created an outlet where she and her family can redirect their emotions and keep their minds busy, while also raising awareness of the disease.

The Breast Friends Fund is a huge undertaking and a labor of love for Sandy, and her family and friends. While Sandy does 90% of the work for its signature event, Taste the Cure, a food and wine fundraiser which features a silent auction, her daughters, Samantha, age 20, and Amanda, 16, manage much of the behind-the-scenes details while her husband, Craig, oversees the website. Sandy’s friends help with event set-up and breakdown and gathering bottles of wine for the celebratory cork pull.

“I have a wonderfully great group of friends,” says Sandy. “And my family, it’s so special and meaningful to me that they are so supportive. Their love gives me the strength to keep going and keep fundraising.”

So far this year, the fund has raised nearly \$200,000 with 72% coming from their signature event, while the rest has been generated from local fundraisers and golf tournaments held by businesses and friends. Seeing how far the Breast Friends Fund has come in six years, she encourages other survivors to consider starting their own fund. “Instead of waiting for new treatments and groundbreaking research to develop, I wanted to do something. We started small and every year, we developed momentum, doubling our donations, and creating awareness of metastatic breast cancer along the way.”

Sandy understands her prognosis and is realistic about her future, but it has not slowed down her drive to contribute to critical research that will help other patients with MBC in the future and may possibly help her in the present.

“The work towards new cancer therapies has come very far, but we need more research. Being able to give directly so every dollar counts is so important. I’m so proud to be able to give every cent we generate directly to the work of Dr. Winer and his team.”

Since Dr. Winer became Sandy’s oncologist seven years ago at Dana-Farber and now at Smilow Cancer Hospital, they have formed a special connection that Sandy attributes to her continued positivity and relentless drive to raise attention and support.

“Dr. Winer is so much more than a doctor; he is part of our family, is invested in the lives of my children, and is someone

I consider a dear friend. Believing in someone like him who is compassionate, empathetic, smart—it makes me want to do more,” she says.

And she does. Recently, Dr. Winer asked Sandy, a once avid runner who has never biked, if she would participate in the Closer to Free Ride, the annual bike ride in Connecticut where one hundred percent of all money raised by volunteers and riders goes to Smilow Cancer Hospital and Yale Cancer Center. Dr. Winer participated virtually, and asked Sandy if she would do the same. Without hesitation, she agreed.

“There is nothing I would not do for Dr. Winer and to support cancer research. Even though I am stage four, he always gives hope and I never feel like I am out of options. I trust him with my life, and he gives our family hope to find a cure in my lifetime.”



Instead of waiting for new treatments and groundbreaking research to develop, I wanted to do something. We started small and every year, we developed momentum, doubling our donations, and creating awareness of metastatic breast cancer along the way.”

—Sandy Cassanelli, Founder of the Breast Friends Fund