



JOEL CALLAWAY

## Recognizing our Nurses

Liz DeLuca

Education has always been important to Liz DeLuca. She and her siblings were the first in their family to attend college, as was her husband, Fred DeLuca. Fred was founder and CEO of SUBWAY® Restaurants. The grants that are given through the foundation he and Liz established, The Frederick A. DeLuca Foundation, typically focuses on young people, helping them with scholarships and tuition reimbursement. “For us,” said Liz, “education was a road to being self-sufficient.”

For Liz, that meant training to be a nurse. After receiving her nursing degree at the University of Connecticut, she completed her clinical work at Yale New Haven Hospital. Then, for five years, she was a nurse in the surgical intensive care unit at the West Haven VA Hospital. “It was really satisfying to work with patients and families going through difficult situations,” she explained.

When Fred was diagnosed with leukemia in 2013, he and Liz particularly appreciated the day-to-day care and comfort they received from the nurses, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants at Smilow Cancer Hospital. Between the long

stays after Fred’s stem cell transplant or short trips for blood transfusions and other tests, Fred was in and out of the hospital for two years, and the couple got a close up view of the dedicated staff at Smilow. Aside from the expertise of the doctors, what struck them most was the empathy and compassion of the nurses. “I think my husband’s life was better because of the care he received at Smilow,” Liz said. “The oncology nurses work with patients who may not have long to live, but they still have to maintain a positive, encouraging attitude,” Liz explained. “I used to think that my experience as a nurse was challenging, but when I saw what the oncology nurses were dealing with, it was just incredible.”

Fred DeLuca agreed, so much so that he told Liz, “I’d really like to thank the people who helped me so much. Let’s think how we can make that happen.”

After Fred’s death, determined to make that happen, Liz returned to Smilow to meet with one of Fred’s doctors, Nikolai Podoltsev, MD, PhD, Assistant Professor of Medicine (Hematology), as well as Catherine Lyons, RN, MS, Vice President, Patient Services, and Chief Nursing Officer, and Lisa Barbarotta, RN, Program Manager, Oncology Nursing Education & Practice. Both Cathy and Lisa were struck by Liz’s affinity for the nursing team. “Liz is a nurse through and through,” said Cathy. “She understands the challenges of trying to provide the best care you can, of keeping the nurses engaged and educated, and what is involved in making sure we have the best and the brightest nurses taking care of our patients.”

Given her nursing background and Fred’s long-time dedication to promoting education, it made sense that Liz decided to direct her generosity in those two areas, asking Cathy Lyons and Lisa Barbarotta in that initial meeting: “What does the

nursing staff need most?”

First on the list of needs for nurses was finding a way to help them educate patients more effectively. “Instead of going over the same information again and again, we wanted a way to transmit information to patients clearly and efficiently,” Cathy said. With Liz’s support, Smilow established a fund for patient education that paid for the development of a patient app about cancer treatment and a video for patients undergoing radiotherapy for cancer.

to the staff rather than have them leave their workplace is huge,” said Cathy.

The DeLuca Foundation’s grants are supporting the professional development of Smilow’s nurses in other ways, too. Beginning in 2016, Liz started funding scholarships and offering extra tuition reimbursement that has made it easier for a number of nurses to pay for their education. The grants have also helped nurses attend national conferences and meetings, and have paid for a professional library

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“Now we’re about to make videos for chemotherapy and immunotherapy education. Families can watch them and then we can answer their questions in a more targeted way,” Cathy explained.

But just as key, in Liz’s mind, was furthering education for nurses. One challenge: A far-flung nursing staff. The Smilow network reaches throughout Connecticut, making it difficult for some nurses to get to events and trainings. “There is a simulation center on the main campus in New Haven, with manikins standing in for patients that do all the things that patients do” explained Liz. “The nurses use the manikins to practice for all kinds of situations.”

With the DeLuca Foundation’s financial help, Smilow was able to purchase another manikin—nicknamed the Sim Man—that will be transported to Smilow’s Care Centers. “Being able to take this training directly

on the nursing unit. “In May of 2018, we did our first oncology nursing grand rounds, bringing in a nationally renowned speaker with over three hundred attendees,” said Cathy.

The results of these ongoing efforts will impact nursing at Smilow for years to come. “Beyond the innovative educational instruments for patients and the training for nurses, the downstream effect of Liz’s support is that nurses here feel better about their job,” explained Cathy. “As word gets out, Smilow will become even more of a destination facility for nurses. A single donation can make a world of difference.”

That’s exactly the kind of result Liz and Fred were hoping for. “Fred and I felt it was important to acknowledge and reward the efforts of all caregivers. It is their work that makes a patient’s life better. It is my hope that the Foundation’s support will help in that regard.” 