



HELPING PEOPLE

She wasn't supposed to make it five years. Now, she's beating cancer and helping hundreds

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More than 300 men and women gathered in a Fort Lauderdale ballroom recently to sing “Happy Birthday Debbie” to a petite woman blowing out the candles on a colorful two-tiered cake.

The celebration is festive, yet emotional, as Debbie Zelman tells her guests she is grateful she has made it to her 50th birthday.

A decade ago, such a celebration seemed doubtful. Shortly after her 40th birthday, Zelman received a devastating diagnosis: The South Florida attorney and mother of three learned she had Stage IV stomach cancer. Doctors told Zelman that her cancer was inoperable and incurable and that her chance of being alive in five years was only 4 percent.

She refused to accept the grim diagnosis and quickly moved into action.

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“When I was first diagnosed with stomach cancer in 2008, there were no resources and very little research funding. I was determined to make a difference for others,” Zelman said.

She launched a foundation to bring awareness to stomach cancer, provide support to patients and their families and raise money for finding a cure.

Now, nearly a decade after her diagnosis, Debbie has endured hundreds of rounds of chemo, radiation and treatments in her battle against stomach cancer. At the same time, she has been the tenacious force behind Debbie’s Dream Foundation: Curing Stomach Cancer.

“Debbie is an anomaly,” said Linda Gendler, a board member and co-chair of the Dream Big Birthday luncheon. “When she started the organization, no one thought Debbie would still be here to celebrate 50. It’s a testament to her strength and determination.”







Debbie Zelman and foundation board members lobby Congress for stomach cancer research grants, February 2017.

Darryl Nobles

Debbie's Dream Foundation began as a collection of South Florida volunteers dedicated to helping a friend and neighbor create a stomach cancer community and find a cure. Today, the foundation brings in medical experts, high school students, and hundreds of volunteers across the country in the effort to make a cure for stomach cancer a reality. Most important, Zelman said, stomach cancer patients and their families now have a support community through DDF to learn about clinical trials, new treatments or participate in monthly educational webinars.

In addition to the South Florida headquarters, DDF has 27 chapters in the United States and international chapters in Canada and Germany. Its Patient Resource Education Program (PREP) has supported and educated nearly 600 stomach cancer patients, their caregivers and family members from 38 states and 21 countries.

“Debbie took a cause that had no voice and gave it one,” said Michael Ehren, a Fort Lauderdale attorney and vice president of Debbie's Dream Foundation. “The grassroots effort has grown into something bigger, and now stomach cancer patients all over the world look to Debbie and DDF for encouragement, and to make a cure a reality.”

Each February, DDF advocates travel to Capitol Hill to lobby Congress for more stomach cancer research funding. Zelman and her team have seen their efforts pay off: Between fiscal years 2015 and 2016, the Department of Defense allocated about \$12 million for stomach cancer research from its Peer Reviewed Cancer Research Program. For 2017, stomach cancer research received another \$6 million.

Zelman assembled a team of 31 medical experts to serve as the foundation's Scientific and Medical Advisory Board. Members include clinicians who specialize in stomach, esophageal and GE junction cancer. Each April, the foundation brings many of the experts together to share information with each other and with stomach cancer patients worldwide at the DDF Stomach Cancer Educational Symposium in Fort Lauderdale. The foundation now hosts two additional symposia each year around the country.

Since 2013, the foundation has awarded eight grants totaling \$650,000 in funding to scientists across the country. The foundation is working on an additional grant that would bring that total to \$700,000 in early 2018.

Meanwhile, Zelman remains on treatment, fighting hard while maintaining her optimism: “As I continue this fight, I’m truly humbled and amazed by the countless others who support my vision and continue to dream big with me so that one day we can make the cure for stomach cancer a reality.”

HOW TO GIVE

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