



# BEYOND CANCER

## We may have lost Debbie Zelman, but her dream & inspiration live on

He was afraid, confused, and worried about his future. After receiving the most devastating news that anyone could get, Pat Campola feared that he had nowhere to turn.

“When you are diagnosed with stomach cancer your world no longer is the same,” said Campola, a stage II stomach cancer survivor who at the time was given a 50/50 chance of living another five years. “Thoughts of how long you will live, what suffering you may endure and what your life will be like takes control of your everyday thoughts. That happened to me in September of 2012.”

That was until the day he sat in the waiting room for a doctor’s appointment and started a conversation with woman who was sitting next to him. He recounts that she had a stack of papers on her lap and a cell phone that seemed to always be ringing. Campola asked if she was seeing the same doctor as he was, and she said yes.

“I asked what was wrong with her and she said she was being treated for stage IV stomach cancer,” said Campola. “[She] told me about Debbie’s Dream Foundation, which was starting to take off and asked if I would help. Let me rephrase that, she told me I needed to get involved. That person was Debbie Zelman and from that day forward I would always say ‘You can never say no to Debbie.’”

A woman of great influence, Debbie began her journey in 2008, when she was diagnosed with stage IV stomach cancer and was told that her chance of living five years beyond her diagnosis was only 4%. At the time, she was a 40-year-old successful attorney with a husband and three small children. She founded **Debbie’s Dream Foundation: Curing Stomach Cancer** (DDF) in 2009 with a small group of friends, family, and neighbors, who she skillfully persuaded to join her cause. She would later convince a group of medical

experts, politicians, and volunteers from around the world to get behind her mission as she became the face and voice of stomach cancer survivors worldwide.

“She told me I needed to be a PREP [Patient Resource and Education Program] mentor,” said Campola. “I would be matched to stomach cancer patients in similar stages as mine and be able to share my experiences with them. My time as a PREP mentor has been, and is still, one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.”

During her nearly 10-year battle with stomach cancer, Debbie endured hundreds of rounds of chemo, radiation and treatments which would have left the average person exhausted. However, in spite of her own health issues Debbie still found time to travel to DDF’s annual Advocacy Day on Capitol Hill, speak at symposia and conferences, and run successful fundraising events in her home state of Florida.

“Debbie Zelman was one of the most inspirational, special women I have ever met in my life,” said long-time friend JoAnne Silverstein. “Debbie’s Dream Foundation was born out of the love for her family, her desire to leave a lasting legacy for her children to remember her by, and a desire to support the countless people who did not have anyone to turn to while they faced stomach cancer.”

More than an advocate and pioneer, Debbie was a dedicated mother, a devoted wife, and a loving daughter and friend until the end. She always made family her number one priority; taking her youngest daughter Sarah to school every day, checking in with her twins Rachel and Zachary, who are both away at college; never missing a parent-teacher conference, a family vacation, or being there for family and friends when they needed her.

According to Silverstein, even when Debbie was going through her toughest treatments, she always made time for the people she loved. “I specifically recall a tough six week radiation protocol Debbie had at MD Anderson in Houston, Texas,” said Silverstein. “After weeks of straight radiation, Debbie flew home on

a Saturday morning, got dressed up for my daughter Sydney’s bat mitzvah, and showed up looking beautiful and radiant. She stood by my side and danced along with me with a smile on her face and joy to be sharing in our special event. The next day, Debbie flew back out to Houston to continue her treatments.”

Resilience was a quality that Debbie often showed, which is what makes her death on December 23, 2017 so surreal to those who know her best. “Debbie’s ability to recover and her will to share in life’s most precious events were some of her greatest strengths,” said Silverstein. “It was nearly impossible for people who did not know her story to reconcile the realities Debbie faced on a daily basis.”

Gone but never forgotten, Debbie’s mission to find a cure for stomach cancer will continue through DDF and the countless lives she has touched throughout her journey.

“She was a true warrior, a pioneer and one of the bravest women I have ever met,” said Silverstein. “She had the heart of a lion and her legacy will live on forever in her children and her Debbie’s Dream Foundation where her motto was always ‘Dream Big!’”

“I attended Debbie’s final services where there must have been over 1000 people paying their respects to this extraordinary person,” said Campola. “I plan on continuing my help as a PREP mentor and carrying on Debbie’s good work. She would want me to.”

by **BRITTNAY STARKS**  
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**Pictured Above** Debbie (second from left) with husband Andy Guttman, and JoAnne and Jeffery Silverstein in 2014. **Below Left** Debbie and Pat Campola. **Right** Debbie’s parents Donald and Madelyn Zelman, her youngest daughter Sarah Guttman, her husband Andy Guttman, Debbie, and her twins Rachel and Zachary Guttman in April 2017 at the 8th Annual Dream Makers Gala.

