Canadian Cancer Society / Société canadienne du cancer

Research Connection
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Researchers who *Relay*

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Dr Aaron Wheeler's *Relay* team pitched their tents in a midtown Toronto park one night in June, "but I don't think any of us actually slept," he laughs. "We walked around. We played in a dodge ball tournament. There was music all night and lots of food. We took turns telling stories and saying crazy things to keep each other awake." Dr Wheeler, 34, an assistant professor of chemistry at the University of Toronto, says he and his research lab teammates, all chemists and engineers in their 20s and 30s, set a fundraising goal, which they reached, to raise at least one per cent of their Canadian Cancer Society grant total. "*[Relay]* was a really great reminder to us that this is not government giving us this money or big corporations. It's lots of small donations from a lot of people, and it makes me want to be so careful with the funds."

The Wheeler lab works in "microfluidics", building "labs on a chip". They are working on potential screening tools for breast and lung cancer

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Dr Andras Nagy is a senior investigator at the Samuel Lunenfeld Research Institute in Toronto and a world-renowned stem cell expert. In July, he and his research team left the city behind for a night, heading up to Blue Mountain to walk around a *Relay For Life* track in the heart of Ontario cottage country. "We're very busy in the lab, and it's really good to get into a different environment and be together, just walking and talking about lots of things. I have some very enthusiastic, wonderful people in my lab," he says. "It's a great thing for us to contribute, not just to the research and the knowledge and working towards a cure, but also helping as much as possible with fundraising."

For Dr Nagy, 58, who this year shared a spot on the *Scientific American* Top 10 Honour Roll with US President Barack Obama, *Relay For Life* is also a family affair. His wife and two young children also took part. This was Dr Nagy's third *Relay,* and he has no plans to stop. "We're hooked," he

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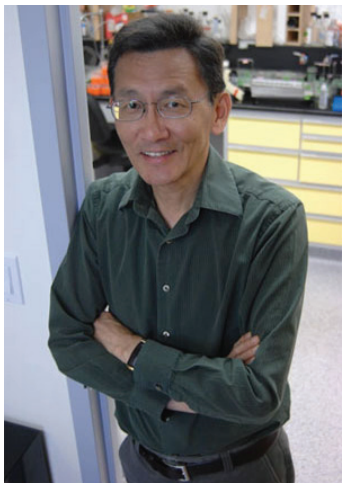

Dr Gerry Krystal has been funded by the Canadian Cancer Society since he was a postdoctoral fellow in the 1970s and says that one of the reasons he participates in so many Society events is that "I love to talk". He is always happy to speak about his research to volunteers, major donors, lodge staff and even high school students. "It's great to see the kids' eyes light up when they learn something interesting they'd never heard before."

Dr Krystal, 54, is a professor in the pathology and laboratory medicine department at UBC in Vancouver. His lab works on modulating the activity of the SHIP gene to kill cancer cells. One thing he has learned over the years is how to talk about research in simple terms. "You don't need to give all the details. Just some take-home messages. There are so many technological breakthroughs in science right now, and I really like to transmit some of that enthusiasm."

He says he knows that not all researchers enjoy the social aspect of talking and teaching as much as he does, but he points out that you don't have to be an outstanding speaker to join a *Relay* team. "The irony is that these days, researchers really have to become good speakers in order to showcase their work." Dr Krystal took a Dale Carnegie speaking course years ago, which he said has "really paid off".

Dr Patrick Lee, a professor and Cameron Chair in basic cancer research at Dalhousie University, is perhaps best known for his discovery of the cancer-killing properties of human reoviruses. He is currently doing research on the tumour-suppressor protein, p53.

Although Dr Lee has never "physically" walked around a *Relay For Life* track, he says he likes to participate at Society events. "The donors want to know what we have done with their money."

"We researchers get very busy and we spend a lot of time in our labs, which is fine and dandy, but it's also part of our job to help the public understand what we do."

He doesn't hesitate to talk about his research to lay audiences. "When you've been in this business for as long as I have, it's not as scary to explain cancer in terms that people can understand. I welcome any opportunity to tell people about the significant progress we have made and that there is hope that one day cancer will be beaten. They need to know that there are people working night and day to solve this problem."

Dr Lee talks to donors and volunteers and also enjoys giving lab tours. "My lab is always open."

"It's so good to see that the work we're doing is paying off and that people are grateful."

Dr Josée Coulombe, 44, puts in long hours working with mice in Dr Douglas Gray's lab at the Ottawa Hospital Research Institute. Dr Coulombe, a senior research associate, and her team are using animal models to study a gene that is not normally expressed in healthy lungs, but is very often overexpressed in lung cancer.

On her way to the third floor lab, she passes by a clinic and sees patients there. But, says Coulombe, "once the patients leave, we don't know what happens to them." That is one of the many reasons that she went to this year's Canadian Cancer Society's *Relay For Life* in Orleans, Ontario. "It's so inspiring to see the survivors who come to *Relay* and say, 'Hey look, I'm here and you saved me.' It gives a message of hope to others who are fighting cancer. And for me, it's so good to see that the work we're doing is paying off and that people are grateful."

Dr Coulombe says her voice shook with emotion when she spoke to a large group of survivors wearing the yellow survivor *Relay* shirts. "I told them a bit about the kind of research we're doing, and they were very attentive. It was very moving."

A survivor says thank you

Diana with her sons Brandon and Kyle.

"What would I say to those researchers? I would give them a big hug and say thank you. It's phenomenal what you are achieving."

Diana Beglaw was 43 when she received the terrifying diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. But after a successful "Whipple procedure" surgery more than 7 years ago, she is a proud and grateful 51-year-old mother of two grown boys and a cancer survivor. "I live every day to the fullest."

An enthusiastic *Relay For Life* participant in Langley, BC, for the last 5 years, Diana says it's great to hear about the progress researchers are making. "It's easy for us to forget about the people behind the scenes. What would I say to those researchers? I would give them a big hug and say thank you. It's phenomenal what you are achieving."

Diana and her *Relay* team.