For Community Service Awardee, nonprofit work fuels Dana-Farber mission

Laura Kleiman, PhD, has no trouble seeking her professional passion. She pursues it everywhere – at work, at home, even in the car.

Dana-Farber’s 2018 Community Service Award recipient, who will be honored at Thursday afternoon’s Martin Luther King celebration (see box), is focused on one goal: making effective cancer treatment available to as many people as possible. By day she is scientific research director of Dana-Farber’s cBio Center, working with researchers and oncologists mining genomic patient data for molecular clues that might thwart cancer’s resistance to existing therapies. On nights and weekends, she puts on her volunteer lab coat as founder and executive director of Cures Within Reach for Cancer (CWR-4C), a Boston-based initiative sponsored by the nonprofit Cures Within Reach that funds and facilitates the development of new cancer treatments based on repurposing generic drugs already FDA-approved for other purposes.

Family circumstances drive her efforts. Kleiman’s mother, father, mother-in-law, and father-in-law have all been diagnosed with cancer, and her mother Frances David-Sontag was a multiple myeloma patient of Paul Richardson, MD, at Dana-Farber before passing away last June. This is why Kleiman makes sure someone else does the driving during her morning and evening commutes, when she pores through her latest CWR-4C correspondence with doctors and patients worldwide who are similarly committed to getting affordable, repurposed drugs into clinical trials and then on to patients.

“I’ve committed in my academic and professional career to breaking down barriers related to translating research from bench to bedside - and no barrier should be easier to break down than access to these repurposed drugs,” says Kleiman, who came to Dana-Farber in October 2016. “Repurposed generics offer a unique opportunity for inexpensive, safe, and highly effective cancer treatments that could be developed in half the time of new drugs, but they are overlooked by drug developers due to a lack of financial incentives typically provided by patent protection or other financial exclusivity.”

The Community Service Award is given annually to a Dana-Farber staff member who inspires and serves as a role model by giving to a cause, making a positive impact on a program or community, and improving the lives of others.

Laura Kleiman, recipient of the 2018 Community Service Award, is scientific research director of Dana-Farber’s cBio Center and volunteer executive director of Cures Within Reach for Cancer. She is pictured here with Chris Sander, director of the cBio Center.

Dana-Farber makes a gift of $1,000 to the charity of the recipient’s choice; Kleiman has directed hers to CWR-4C.

Kleiman makes a clear distinction between her Dana-Farber and CWR-4C jobs, and her organization receives no Dana-Farber funding or donor support. Still, there is clearly great interest by colleagues that CWR-4C succeed in the best interests of Dana-Farber’s mission.

“Laura’s non-profit aims to fill an important gap in our drug development system and get these treatments to cancer patients as quickly as possible,” says Katja Kleinsteuber, PhD, of the Center for Immuno-Oncology, who nominated Kleiman for the award. “Laura volunteered fulltime for two years to establish CWR-4C, and has continued this work [while at Dana-Farber]. She has a global reach and has inspired others to join her effort.”

Among them is David Frank, MD, PhD, of Medical Oncology. His laboratory develops inhibitors of key signaling pathways that drive the malignant behavior of cancer cells; although generic drugs approved for other uses have been proven effective in targeting those pathways, and are available in safe dosages, he has been unable to secure funding beyond small early-phase clinical trials.

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“There are currently no funding mechanisms for the subsequent, larger clinical trials that are critical before these therapies could be used more broadly for the treatment of cancer,” says Frank, who serves as a CWR-4C advisor. “As an oncologist, I see Cures Within Reach for Cancer as being instrumental in enabling those clinical trials, and filling an essential role for our patients.”

Goals like this, Kleiman says, drive her long days – which also include life as a wife and mother of a four-year-old daughter.

“I hope my work leads to a day when all potentially effective cancer treatments are options for patients, regardless of their profitability,” says Kleiman. “That would honor my mother and benefit others who are still fighting cancer.”

- Saul Wisnia

Kleiman with her daughter and mother, Frances David-Sontag. Her mother, who passed away in June 2017, was a multiple myeloma patient of Paul Richardson, MD, at Dana-Farber.