

Castaways Against Cancer Paddle Toward a Cure

For a second year, a group of committed paddlers are about to set off on a week-long kayak expedition that spans 160 miles between Miami and Key West to help fight cancer at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, a part of UHealth - the University of Miami Health System.



Participants in The Blackjack Tour will paddle 160 miles between Miami and Key West to raise money for research at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center.

The Castaways Against Cancer – a Christopher Columbus High School-affiliated kayaking team that has raised funds for cancer research for 22 years – will set to the seas on their latest expedition: *The Blackjack Tour*, June 12-18.

On February 4, World Cancer Day, the non-profit group held a kickoff celebration at Columbus's outdoor Patriot Plaza, where they announced the expedition's theme and unveiled the new logo designed by senior Antonio Varona III. With six weeks left to launch, the Castaways are in the throes of planning, and most important, fundraising.

"Our mission is twofold," said Eric Pino, a teacher at Columbus and captain of Castaways Against Cancer. "It is to fund cancer research and honor those who have fought the fight."

The Castaways Against Cancer was founded in 2000 by Columbus teacher, Steve "OB" O'Brien, after his mother passed away from cancer. Since then, they have raised \$1.2 million for cancer research.

"We have 1,500 students at Columbus, in addition to the staff and administration," Pino continued. "We've all been touched by cancer. We have stories all throughout our hallways that have benefitted from OB's original vision to light a candle instead of cursing the darkness."

Inspiration from loved ones

Pino, an alumnus himself, and the team of mostly teachers and alumni draw inspiration from the Castaways' Honor Board, a section on their website that lists the names of loved ones who are honored with every donation. The names are printed on a banner each year and will live on the site in perpetuity.

All proceeds of *The Blackjack Tour* will benefit cancer research at Sylvester. Last year's tour raised an impressive \$100,000 to support the work of Nagi Ayad, Ph.D., co-director

of Sylvester's Brain Tumor Initiative.

Dr. Ayad is seeking safe, effective therapies for medulloblastomas, the most common type of brain tumor in children. The gift was matched dollar for dollar by Sylvester for a total research investment of \$200,000.

"We are thankful for Eric Pino and Castaways Against Cancer for partnering with us," said Stephen D. Nimer, M.D., director of Sylvester, the Oscar de la Renta Endowed Chair in Cancer Research, and professor of medicine, biochemistry and molecular biology at the Miller School of Medicine. "Every dollar raised helps Sylvester researchers discover and deliver innovative cancer therapies to help our patients and the community."

"It's an honor to partner with a landmark institution in our community such as Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of Miami," said Pino. "We recently received a video from Dr. Ayad, in which he gave us an update and thanked us for our support. I shared that with the team. It carries a lot of weight with our paddlers to be able to witness the impact of our efforts so close to home."

To donate to the team of paddlers participating in *The Blackjack Tour* please visit <https://www.castawaysagainstcancer.com/donate>