



Son's brain tumor diagnosis refocuses a South Florida fundraiser's mission

After her son, Brandon, was diagnosed with brain cancer, Cindy Martel, founder of the non-profit Race for Faith 5k & 10k, shifted the focus of her organization from general fundraising to a partnership with Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center's Brain Tumor Initiative (BTI). Sylvester, South Florida's only NCI-designation Cancer Center, is part of UHealth – University of Miami Health System.

"The Race for Faith started as a way to give back. Every year we would put on a race and give the proceeds to a deserving organization," said Cindy. "After Brandon's brain tumor diagnosis, our purpose shifted to where our heart is: finding a cure for brain tumors. Now, Sylvester's Brain Tumor Initiative will be our sole beneficiary."





From left: Ricardo Jorge Komotar, M.D., Cindy Martel, Brandon Martel, Macarena de la Fuente, M.D, and Michael E. Ivan, M.D.

The BTI consists of specialized physicians and researchers who are committed to brain tumor care. Because Brandon's brain tumors were successfully removed at the BTI, the Martel family has firsthand experience with these expert physicians. Brandon was initially misdiagnosed with cortical dysplasia by his community physician, but it was actually the initial stages of two low-grade IDH mutant glioma tumors – a type of brain cancer that can be treated with surgical removal and ongoing treatment with IDH inhibitor medication to prevent regrowth.

“Back in 2012, I had my first seizure and an MRI showed two spots on my brain, but at the time doctors didn't think they were anything serious,” said Brandon. “Fast-forward to 2020, severe neck pain prompted me to get another MRI. It showed that the two spots grew. The next day, I saw Dr. Komotar at the BTI and was in surgery very quickly after.”

“It's a rare cancer, but to see it in such a young individual is even rarer,” said renowned neurosurgeon Ricardo Jorge Komotar, M.D., director of the Sylvester BTI and professor of neurological surgery at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine.

Cindy and Brandon recently presented a check from this year's Race for Faith to the physicians at the BTI.

“Support from families like the Martels is wonderful because it helps us move the science forward with more clinical trials,” said Macarena de la Fuente, M.D., associate professor of neurology and chief of the neuro-oncology division at the



Miller School. “We are trying to find better treatment options for these young patients that will cause fewer cognitive issues down the road and lead to a better quality of life long-term.”

Researchers at the BTI strive to close the gap between pioneering research and promising treatments by exploring how cancers develop and progress and the intricacies of cellular interactions within tumors. By evaluating a tumor’s genetic profile and how it responds to medication, researchers identify changes at the molecular level and develop customized treatment plans using the latest evidence-based protocols.

“Sylvester believes in dedicating resources to tough-to-treat cancers in order to build luminary cancer research programs that save people’s lives,” said Stephen D. Nimer, M.D., director of Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, the Oscar de la Renta Endowed Chair in Cancer Research, professor of medicine, biochemistry and molecular biology, professor of chemical, environmental and materials engineering, and executive dean for research at the Miller School.

“We have tremendous people who are interested in doing research and developing new therapies, but we need additional funds to get us there,” added Michael E. Ivan, M.D., director of research for the BTI. “The only way we are going to make a difference in treating brain tumors is to look at every aspect, because it’s such a difficult problem to solve.”

As for Brandon, fortunately the cancer was caught soon enough that the 24-year-old responded well to surgery and is doing well with the ongoing maintenance treatment. “I wanted to do something to support these doctors who saved my life and honestly just give them a hug,” Brandon said. “I’m so glad



that we are able to give funds to support ongoing research to help other people with brain tumors.”

The Martel family says they are committed to making sure the BTI has the support it needs.

“The goal for next year is to have more money to give to the BTI, get more runners, do more marketing, and get more sponsors,” said Cindy. “I will never stop. This is who I am. This is my heart now.”

The partnership with the Race for Faith is part of the University’s Ever Brighter: The Campaign for Our Next Century. The most ambitious in the University’s history, the \$2.5 billion campaign is set to conclude in 2025, when the University will celebrate its centennial.

If you would like to contribute to the Brain Tumor Initiative at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, contact Britten King at britten.king@med.miami.edu or 305-243-9949.

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