



PETER BAKER



## A Class Act

**T**he Yale Class of 1961 Cancer Center Endowment provides generous support for some of Yale Cancer Center’s most promising scientists.

The Yale Class of 1961 calls itself “the undefeated class.” That proud nickname stems from the perfect 9-0 record of the 1960 Yale Bulldogs football team, which won the Ivy League that year. In the nearly six decades since graduation, the alumni of the Class of ’61 have shown the same determination and teamwork as their namesake, as they have stayed connected, worked together toward a larger goal, and established their own legacy.

Their legacy is the Yale Class of 1961 Cancer Center Endowment. Established in 2016, the Endowment, which stands at more than \$1.5 million and continues to grow, has honored one Yale Cancer Center faculty member each year since its inception with a \$50,000 grant to support their highly promising cancer research.

“This Endowment is the only gift of its kind to Yale Cancer Center,” explained Julie Parr, Senior Director of Development for Yale Cancer Center. “This is the only class gift that supports the Cancer Center. And it’s one of the few endowments supporting

discovery science. That’s important, for it will continue supporting our vital research for years to come.”

The Class of 1961’s commitment to Yale Cancer Center (YCC) dates back to 2011. The Class is an extremely tight-knit group; members reconnect at a number of “mini-reunions” around the country each year. Several classmates have been personally affected by cancer. As their milestone 50th reunion approached, these close classmates wished to use their class gift to support the tremendous advances taking place at Smilow Cancer Hospital, which had opened just two years earlier. They banded together to raise \$1 million for the YCC Director’s Fund to purchase equipment for Smilow. That effort was led by Vincent Teti. An additional \$200,000 was designated for a YCC research fund named The Cantor-Smith Cancer Research Fund, in honor of classmates Ed Cantor and DeForest Smith, who had served as class co-chairmen for 20 years, and their wives.

That seed of a research fund blossomed into a full-blown endowment as the class gathered for its 55th reunion in 2016. “The idea of building it into something substantially bigger, something that could make a more meaningful contribution, really appealed to us,” said Ed Cantor. “We felt we could create a legacy for our class. At our age, that word ‘legacy’ has become very important to us.”

Classmate John de Neufville helped lead the effort. As a member of the Yale Cancer Center Director’s Advisory Board, Mr. de Neufville has a front row seat on the progress and innovation underway at the Cancer Center. “As a scientist, I’m always very interested in hearing about evolving cancer treatment opportunities,” Mr. de Neufville said. “Attending the board meetings is a science holiday for me.”

The opportunity to make a real impact on cancer research sparked a flurry of donations; more than 200 classmates, widows, and friends have since given to the renamed Yale Class of

1961 Cancer Center Endowment. “We are extremely grateful to the Yale Class of 1961 for their generous support of the vital, innovative cancer research taking place at Yale Cancer Center,” Yale Cancer Center’s Director, Charles S. Fuchs, MD, MPH, said.

Classmate Bruce Chabner, MD, Clinical Director, Emeritus, of the Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center and Professor of Medicine, Harvard Medical School, helped structure the Endowment’s research grants. They’re noteworthy in their support of YCC faculty members age 45 and under, and for funding not a specific project but the overall arc of a researcher’s work. To select grant winners, YCC leadership reviews each nominee’s curriculum vitae, paying particular attention to the published research they have conducted in their labs at Yale and the impact of their work.

“The winners of these prizes are many of our most promising cancer researchers,” explained Daniel DiMaio, MD, PhD, Deputy Director of YCC and coordinator of the grant selection process. “Each have emerged as leading mid-career scientists who have already made important contributions to cancer research and have many more years of exciting research ahead of them. This award allows us to recognize their prior contributions and help inspire them to continue on their exceptional trajectory.”

Valentina Greco, PhD, the Carolyn Walch Slayman Professor of Genetics, won the grant in 2017. Her lab studies how organs are maintained throughout life, and she uses mouse models to evaluate how skin tissues function in spite of, and perhaps even thanks to, the mutations they carry. “It was a true honor for my lab members’ work to be recognized through this award,” she noted, “and also incredibly re-energizing to know that your close colleagues value your lab’s contributions.”

In 2018, the grant was awarded to Katerina Politi, PhD, Associate Professor

of Pathology and co-leader of YCC’s Cancer Signaling Networks Research Program. The grant has enabled her lab to use new approaches, including the cutting-edge CRISPR/Cas9 gene editing tool and techniques to study tumors at the single-cell level to gain new insights into drug resistance. “I was honored and thrilled to hear that I had won the Class of 1961 Research Award,” Dr. Politi said. “Having started my independent research career at Yale, this award is especially meaningful for me.”

Grant winners have shared their gratitude and updates on their research with their benefactors by speaking at recent Class of 1961 mini-reunions. “The Class loves hearing from the researchers,” Ms. Parr said. “They can see the fruits of their labor. They’re extremely committed to the Endowment, to Yale, and to the Cancer Center.”

As their 60th reunion approaches in 2021, the Class of 1961 is doubling down on its support of YCC. Thanks to an anonymous donor, this year the Endowment will award not one, but two research grants each year, the ongoing additional cost of which will gradually be covered by the Endowment as it grows toward its 60th Reunion goal of \$2 million.

“It wouldn’t have occurred to me when we started 10 years ago that we would be where we are today,” expressed Mr. de Neufville. “Our contributors have been amazingly generous. The whole process of working with my classmates toward a common goal has been extremely gratifying and has deepened my connections to the Class of 1961 in ways that I couldn’t possibly have imagined.”

### CLASS OF ’61 GRANT RECIPIENTS:

- 2015 Melinda Irwin, PhD, MPH
- 2016 Susan Kaech, PhD and Joseph Contessa, MD, PhD
- 2017 Valentina Greco, PhD
- 2018 Katerina Politi, PhD
- 2019 Qin Yan, PhD