

# Jump-starting Cancer Research and Treatment

BY ROBIN HEFFLER

By any measure, Stacy and Alberto Valner, founders of Phase ONE Foundation, are lucky. The young couple have four healthy children, many friends, a thriving real estate development business, and a spacious, casually elegant Brentwood home. But as so many others have discovered, illness does not discriminate. A single

devastating week in 1998 brought the news that Alberto had advanced testicular cancer and his mother had a fast-growing and widespread form of cancer.

After undergoing two surgeries and four cycles of chemotherapy in six months, Alberto was in remission. But as he was gaining a new lease on life, his mother



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—STACY AND ALBERTO VALNER, PHASE ONE FOUNDATION

PHOTO BY JULIANE BACKMANN

passed away. “We were very grateful for his health,” says Stacy. “But,” Alberto adds “we also wanted to make sure that others are not unfortunate like my mother, who was only 59 when we lost her.” The Valners invited to their home a half-dozen friends in their 30s who also were touched by cancer to discuss how they could join together to fight the disease. Together, they launched the Phase ONE Foundation in 2000.

The vision was to support Phase I clinical research—the first level of drug testing required by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)—as well as treatment programs for patients with cancer, particularly those who have exhausted traditional treatment options. This year, Phase ONE decided to partner with Cedars-Sinai and take its quest to a new level by funding an endowed chair and the directorship of the Samuel Oschin Comprehensive Cancer Institute.

Steven Piantadosi, MD, PhD, an internationally renowned cancer researcher, will hold both titles. A faculty member of The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and the university’s Bloomberg School of Public Health, he is one of the world’s leading experts in the design of clinical trials for cancer research. Dr. Piantadosi has been a member of several FDA committees and is senior editor of the journal *Clinical Cancer Research*. He speaks of being drawn to Cedars-Sinai by its “national reputation for high-quality patient care and its strengths in translational research, bringing the latest research from the laboratory to the patient’s bedside quickly.”

That same reputation caught the attention of Phase ONE Foundation. The gift to Cedars-Sinai is the biggest commitment the Foundation has made to date, according to Steven Romick, a Foundation board member who also sits on the Medical Center’s Finance Committee.

“The Phase ONE board chose Cedars-Sinai because of its tremendous reputation for patient treatment,” says Romick, who has known Alberto Valner for 25 years, and whose three daughters were born at Cedars-Sinai. Romick lost his first wife to neuroendocrine carcinoma. “We felt that by investing a projected \$100 million in a new cancer center, the Medical Center was making a strong

commitment to becoming a top leader in research as well as treatment. In endowing the chair for the director of the new cancer center, we feel like we are giving Dr. Piantadosi the keys to drive a very powerful car. It is an impactful gift because it will be invested for the long-term as part of the endowment.”

The Foundation first contributed to Cedars-Sinai four years ago to fund prostate cancer research. Stacy Valner notes that the recent gift is a shift in emphasis for the Foundation, representing an evolution of its mission to fund clinical trials. “Now we want to have a bigger reach and create the best cancer center that Los Angeles has to offer,” she says. “We believe in developing the Medical Center’s cancer program because Cedars-Sinai is a major institution and an invaluable resource for the community.”

Phase ONE’s ability to make a major gift is the result of a steady increase in fund-raising power since its inception eight years ago. Besides Cedars-Sinai, the Foundation contributes to research at UCLA, City of Hope, USC, and Saint John’s Medical Center in Santa Monica. “We are funding exclusively in Southern California because we want to give something back to our community,” says Alberto. “There are great doctors and treatment centers here.”

All of Alberto and Stacy’s four children, ages 4 to 15, were born at Cedars-Sinai, and the couple and other members of Phase ONE’s board have been frequent patients at the Medical Center. In addition to Romick’s involvement with the Finance Committee, two other Phase ONE board members, Cary Meadow and Mark Freeman, serve on the Board of Governors. “The board feels a personal connection to Cedars-Sinai: It is our hospital,” Stacy notes.

As an all-volunteer organization, Phase ONE is constantly expanding its reach. “We never wanted the Foundation to be about us,” says Stacy. “That’s why our name isn’t on it. As the Foundation grows, we want others to take over, so that it does not end with us.” Adds Alberto, “The Board has always felt that the main purpose of the Phase ONE Foundation has been to provide funding for the best clinical trials and cancer treatments in our community. With the Foundation’s endowment of this chair at Cedars-Sinai, we are getting a step closer in achieving our goals.” ■