T
the 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 the winners.

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 evolving cancer treatment opportunities. “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 grants each year, the ongoing cost of which will gradually cover 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 connection 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 Karch, PhD and Joseph Contessa, MD, PhD
2017 Valentina Greco, PhD
2018 Katerina Politi, PhD
2019 Qin Yan, PhD

Yalecancercenter.org | centerpoint magazine