

A Walk Fit For a Wonder Woman

Real-Life Superheroine Jessica Berman, Who Succumbed to Breast Cancer Last Year, Inspires the Wonder Woman Walk in Pacific Palisades on Sept. 13

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In the pages of DC Comics, Wonder Woman is actually an Amazonian warrior princess posing as U.S. military nurse Diana Prince. In the real world, Pacific Palisades had a wonder woman of its own: **Jessica M. Berman**.

Berman was a loving wife, mother and community member who led the charge to move from Brentwood to the Palisades, a neighborhood she was smitten with.

Unfortunately, Jessica, diagnosed with Stage III breast cancer while five months pregnant, died last August. She was only 38 years old.

Despite being in deep grief for his wife, **David Berman**, with the support of their two children **Abby**, 6, and **Leo**, 4, willed the inaugural **Jessica M. Berman Wonder Woman Walk for Breast Cancer** into fruition on Sunday, Sept. 13 in **Palisades Park**.

The 5K walk, which will benefit Tower Cancer Research Foundation (TCRF), intends to raise \$500,000. (At press time, \$300,000 had already been raised.)

The Berman family had only lived in the Palisades for a year and a half at the time of Jessica's passing. However, Berman, who could never see a difference between living in the Palisades versus their long-time Brentwood neighborhood, is glad he gave in to his wife's wishes to move.

"Thank God I did that while she was alive," he said. "It really is Pleasantville, it is Mayberry R.F.D. [Moving here] really was a game changer. I was naïve to that."

In the years following her diagnosis, Jessica, a one-time Miss Teenage California and a former investment banker and private equity manager, was holding steady and even blogging about her cancer experiences. However, her last four months saw a rapid decline in health.

"She really took control, trying to control everything she could do," Berman recalled of his wife. "The kids were almost both too young, thankfully."

However, picking up the pieces proved challenging for Berman.

"It was incredibly painful. She was successful in her life and career."

Tower Cancer Research



David Berman, with late wife Jessica Berman and their kids Leo and Abby, has created the Wonder Woman Walk to honor her and to raise \$500,000 for the Tower Cancer Research Foundation.

Photo courtesy of David Berman

Foundation Executive Director Linda David recalls when Berman came to her department with an idea.

"David [Berman] had a meeting with myself and Nancy Mishkin, chair of the TCRF board. He wanted to get involved in some way," she remembered. "Jessica had loved the Magnolia Council, a group that had honored her previously."

"As a legacy for her, I'm all about philanthropy," Berman said.

After all, the warrior princess character (who, played by Gal Gadot, makes her first cinematic appearance in March 2016 opposite Palisadian **Ben Affleck's** Batman in the highly anticipated "Batman vs. Superman") reflected Jessica Berman's tough spirit, as summed up in one of her blog entries, "Don't Mess With Jess."

"I almost see the analogy with the new generation," Berman said of Gadot's upcoming Wonder Woman.

The advertising usage of

"It's not just about the walk, it's about Jessica's story."

~ the late Jessica M. Berman's husband, David Berman

Via the Jessica M. Berman Memorial Foundation, he intends to raise \$500,000 for research grants at UCLA every year and subsidize dozens of researchers committed to stopping breast cancer.

Coming up with a title for the Jessica M. Berman memorial event came naturally.

"My wife had this affinity for Wonder Woman," Berman recalled.

So while it was a bit of a process bureaucratically, it wasn't too hard to convince DC Comics, publisher of Wonder Woman comics since its inception in 1941, to license out use of the character for a year to advertise the event. As a businessman, Berman, who has worked with TV's Wonder Woman Lynda Carter for an event, had an in with DC Comics President Diane Nelson.

Wonder Woman notwithstanding, it was also important to Berman that Jessica's hometown, be ground zero for this event.

"His kids used to participate at other walks, handing out lemonade to walkers passing by, so it was natural for him to think of the Palisades," TCRF's David said. "Because David really stressed the family-friendly elements, we're going to have a kid zone, balloon twisters, bounce house, handouts, giveaways and coconut water—stressing the healthy. No Red Bull in the morning, none of those vendors."

The event will run roughly through midday.

As for TCRF's David, she has enjoyed seeing this first-year event come together.

"It has been an incredible experience," she said. "The committee that David [Ber-

man] assembled to help work on the event, primarily Jessica's friends, is a powerful group, mostly women, articulate, focused. They're doing an amazing job fundraising and getting sponsors and vendors. They're all about getting it done and getting it done right."

The Wonder Woman Walk really has been a team effort: American Apparel donated the t-shirts while Berman and his children have been putting up lawn signs touting the event all over the Palisades since the Fourth of July weekend.

Money raised from this weekend's event goes to a good cause. TCRF awards a multitude of different scientific grants: one-year \$100,000 Career Development Grants, five-year \$500,000 Senior Investigator Grants and \$1 million Multi-Disciplinary Discovery Funds.

The physician scientists who receive TCRF's Career Development Grants often demonstrate such promising results that they later obtain large grants from other foundations and cancer research centers. TCRF's initial \$2 million investment has led to more than \$30 million in additional clinical research funding.

On Sept. 13, check-in begins at 8 a.m. with an awards ceremony at 8:40 a.m. and the walk beginning at 9 a.m.

"We're honoring Christina Applegate for her courage in being so public in her breast cancer journey," said TCRF's David.

Applegate, best known for roles in the "Anchorman" movies and on "Married with Children," will be honored alongside Jessica's oncologist, Dr. Philomena McAndrew.

On the morning of the event, materials will be handed out that will enlighten participants about the woman who inspired what Berman hopes will continue as a new annual Palisades tradition.

After all, for Berman, "It's not just about the walk, it's about Jessica's story."

The Jessica M. Berman Wonder Woman Walk for Breast Cancer takes place at the Palisades Recreation Center, 851 Alma Real Dr. Check-in: 8 a.m.; 5K walk begins at 9 a.m. Registration fee: \$50 (for adults and kids 12+); \$75 on day of event. Free t-shirt and gift bag with registration. Kids under 12 admitted free and encouraged to dress up as their favorite superhero. wonderwomanwalk.org.