Everyone can have a role in curing cancer: from patrons, to researchers, to doctors, and even celebrities who lend their faces—and give generous checks—to the cause. At a recent Tower Cancer Research Foundation event, more than 125 players to a swing to benefit the Second Annual Jack Mishkin Memorial Golf Classic. Jack Mishkin was a philanthropist, businessman and an avid golfer whose life was cut short by mesothelioma. He and wife Nancy, the current chairwoman of the Tower board, have helped the foundation raise over $25 million in the last decade.

Here are a series of interviews with some of the participants of this year’s tournament, including Nancy Mishkin, actors Kevin Nealon and Donald Faison, and oncologist Solomon Hamburg, MD. They chatted with ABILITY’s Chet Cooper, Lia Martirosyan and Jeff Charlebois at El Caballero Country Club in Tarzana, CA.

NANCY MISHKIN: NO STRESS

Jeff Charlebois: Do you have anything to do with paralysis research?

Mishkin: Hebrew University is doing unbelievable things. Have you looked them up?

Charlebois: I just sent Chet an article about a trial in England.

Mishkin: I want you to look up Hebrew University and call them. Find out if they’re doing some trials, and if you can be in one.

Charlebois: For years I’ve been reading about rats. I’ll be their lab rat.

Mishkin: Well, let me tell you something about rats. My husband died of mesothelioma. It’s a cancer you get from asbestos, and it’s a death sentence. Most people die right away or 12 to 14 months out. One trial that he was accepted into, it was on phase 2, which means that it’s another step towards 4, which is the best... Jack was accepted, and, as it turned out, he got the real McCoy. We were very excited. Then, about seven weeks in, he got pancreatitis. And then he got colitis. He was in the hospital for a long time. Because he was cramping in the stomach area so badly, they gave him a drug that Crohn’s disease patients take. And that drug has rat or mice—whatever they’re using from those animals in the drug.

Finally the colitis got better, the pancreatitis got better, but he was off the trial because it was gonna kill him. And then we found out about another trial back east, because when you have a cancer that kills, you’re praying for a miracle. He was accepted to the trial back east, and we were so excited. But two to three days before we were supposed to leave, we found out he couldn’t take the trial because he took that particular drug.

Cooper: Almost impossible to know if you’ve done something to block you from entering a trial.

Mishkin: Right. I was just talking to one of our doctors, and cancer is cunning and baffling, like a lot of diseases are. Someone can have four or five lymph nodes affected and die, while somebody who has 24 lymph nodes affected, lives. Five people have the exact same tumor, and the drug helps one and not the other four. There’s no explaining it, there really isn’t. I don’t know if it’s luck or genes.

With about 80 percent of cancers, the immune system gets turned off (and can’t fight), that’s why we get chemotherapy and all of that, because it helps your body fight the cancer. What we’re doing now is looking at drugs and things that activate the immune system so it can help fight.

Charlebois: We need to get immunized.

Mishkin: (laughs) Yeah. We have to get that immune system working. I’m involved with a women’s group that I founded called the Magnolias. I tell the women all the time, “Listen, guys, it’s all about your immune system. It’s about trying your best to be calm, identifying when you have those feelings, because those feelings turn off that immune system. And you may have multiple sclerosis (MS) in your system, you may have cancer in your system that kind of lays dormant until something....”

Martirosyan: —triggers it.
Mishkin: Yes. "—that affects the immune system, and that disease is gonna pop up." They look at the kind of funny, and I know it for a fact because stress and anxiety are real killers.

Rachel Schwartz: (who does PR for the tournament) And you’ve survived it as well.

Mishkin: I’m a breast cancer survivor. I think about four or five years prior to having my diagnosis, I had a lot of stress and anxiety. It was family-related, and it went on for about five years. I take everything to heart. It’s hard for me not to. Had I dealt with those feelings properly—I’m not saying that I wouldn’t have gotten cancer—but maybe my immune system would have been there to fight the cells that were in my system.

Charlebois: I think you’re right. Four years ago I was filming a sitcom and had laid out a lot of money for it. I got headaches, and one morning I woke up and half my head was covered in blisters. It was shining.

Mishkin: I had that before. It’s the stress. Interesting story. A group of us went on a cruise with my mother in Russia (laughs). My mom was in the beginning of not senility, but something wasn’t right. And I thought it was unfair for my mom’s friend to have to share a room with her. I loved my mom, she was a wonderful lady, but she was a little out there. (She’s since passed away.)

So I was with her, and it was hard on me. I tried to be very calm. “Come on, Mom.” I would say, “Let’s go eat breakfast.” And I’d hold her when she walked and do things to make it pleasant for everyone else and for her to feel all right. But by the fourth day of the cruise, I got these blisters on my face. And there was a doctor on the cruise, this large Russian woman with very short white hair, who was in the military, so she had that military stance. You know?

Charlebois: Was her name Oya?

(laughter)

Mishkin: Yeah! Must have been! But you know, she was a wonderful lady who didn’t speak English, but she had that I’m a doctor authority.

(laughter)

So I went to see her, and the first thing she said through an interpreter was, “I think you caught a cold on your face,” I said. “A cold on my face? It’s killing me!” So they decided it was shingles. She was giving me very strong shots in my arm. The shingles still hurt but not as badly. I could function with bangs and glasses. I don’t think my mother was even aware I had gotten shingles. But when we got to Moscow, there was an ambulance waiting for me, and they took me to a fabulous American hospital, where I saw a neurologist, dermatologist and ophthalmologist—because you can lose your sight.

Schwartz: Yeah, it’s very dangerous.

Mishkin: And she said the medicine they were giving me was a good thing.

Charlebois: Shingles is the worse thing I’ve ever had. I was screaming in pain.

Mishkin: Being treated in Russia was an interesting experience, because the doctors come out to the waiting room to get you, and they were lovely. They walked you into their offices. They had old-fashioned instruments. The ophthalmologist opened the wooden box, and all the things were laid out.

Anxiety and stress can do a number. I’m out there preaching about it. A lot of it is maybe just turning around and walking the other way. I don’t know what the answer is.

Martirosyan: There is a lot we hear about the correlation of previous dormant illnesses developing into cancer.

Mishkin: There could be a lot of things we’re not aware of. We’re finding a lot of young girls are coming in with breast cancer, and a triple-negative type, which is a bad, very aggressive cancer, and they’re in their 30’s. It’s alarming.

Charlebois: I think there’s a lot to this stress thing; it can lower your immune system.

Mishkin: And inflammation, interestingly enough. When I was at Hebrew University, which I contribute to, I was listening to a whole group of brain scientists. I didn’t understand a lot of what they were saying, but the gist of it was that they think we have inflammation in our brain that’s causing all these maladies. The doctors there recommended we take an anti-inflammatory every day. He said it’s important because inflammation is not healthy and not good for our systems. Who knows? I’m pickled.

Charlebois: You said your husband went through some beginning trials. Are those hard to get into? At one point I’d like to try.

Mishkin: When Jack got sick, there were conference calls like you wouldn’t believe. You have to qualify. It’s a controlled study, and millions of dollars go into them. The drug companies put in a lot of money to get to that point.

Martirosyan: Are you focused mainly on mesothelioma or melanoma as well?

Mishkin: Everything. Jack took breast cancer drugs, and it slowed the growth.

Martirosyan: So immunotherapy is the latest treatment your researchers have been working on?

Mishkin: Yes, we give support for the research. We give grants. This year we gave out three $100,000 grants and two half-million dollar grants.

My sister had stage-3 colon cancer, and she got chemotherapies and colonics, or maybe just pancreasitics, and she called me and said, “I can’t do any more than two chemotherapies.” The pancreasitics is gonna kill me.” I started to cry. I was devastated. I called Solomon Hamburg, who’s here, who was Jack’s doctor, and he said, “You know, we don’t know if two is enough. Three is enough, or so is enough.” As it turns out, two treatments were enough. It’s a crapshoot. My sister came through it; she’ll be here later today.

Martirosyan: Wonderful for her.

Mishkin: I don’t know the answer: but I do know that it’ll be found through research.

Charlebois: Will they admit people like me?
Mishkin: First of all, they want anybody who will pass whatever their requirements are, because it's a controlled study. It's like any other kind of study you do. For instance, you can't have smoked for 25 years or been a drinker for 10 years. They're really, really careful with that, because the results are very important. So you have a control group of people who are all very similar who have the same cancer, and you're using the drug on them, and that's the only way you can get positive results. There are trials going on in Europe. I think they're a little bit ahead of us. Our government doesn't have money, so they're only giving the top 7 percent of applicants' money. That's why it's so important for foundations like ours to raise funds to support studies. We give money to some of these young kids who don't have tabs yet. The $100,000 grants are for the young ones, but I feel the young ones are our future.

A $100,000 grant we gave to one of them generated $4 million. I'm not sure if the research was on lymphoma, but we're getting a big return on our money. And our panel of doctors is from all over: UCLA, Cedars... The doctors who reviewed our grants were very impressed this year with the quality of our applicants, and what these kids want to do.

Cooper: Do you fund anywhere?

Mishkin: Just in California, and mostly in this area. But if somebody needs anything from San Diego, we'll certainly have a look at it. But people won't give us money for New York or Ohio. They want it to stay here. We're donor-directed, which means that instead of giving your money to Cedars, which is okay because they need it, but some people want to see what their money is doing. So we will find a trial. If they're interested in any kind of kidney cancer or whatever, we will try to find a trial. We won't take just anyone that comes up, but if there's one that looks promising, we'll go to that. That's how we operate.

So far everybody's been very happy. And some of these young scientists come out when we have events, and they're pleased. We're developing a really nice reputation.

Charlebois: Is the science community good at sharing research and things like that?

Mishkin: Nobody's keeping anything a secret. I get these naysayers who think that (these researchers have) got the answer but don't want to give it out because they're making too much money. I look at these people and say: "Do you think for one minute if somebody had a cure they'd keep it a secret? Why? They'd be millionaires! Their picture would be on every publication. If it's not coming out with it, it's certainly somebody working with them, because that's how everybody gets exposed, usually. Bernie Madoff got exposed, everybody gets exposed. If they're not doing the work, they're doing what they can. There are so many different kinds of cancers, and we are as different as our signatures.

Charlebois: Would you think that Hebrew University in Israel, in general, is further ahead of us?

Mishkin: I don't know, but I know that they're doing wonderful research, and I think if you're looking, certainly go there, because I do remember some things there. And see what Germany's doing, what Italy's doing.

Cooper: We've been around the world, and they all talk to each other. We're deep into China, and they're talking with the scientists in the US.

Mishkin: Right. I know Jack's doctor was looking everywhere. We would have gone anywhere.

Charlebois: I once read that in Iran, or some country, they were implanting stem cells in the spinal cord or whatever, but some people had died because the stem cells grew tumors. But they said, "We can't corroborate that. We don't have access to those studies. We don't know if it's true. We don't know if they had anybody up walking."

Mishkin: The study may not have been exactly put together with the most complete study guidelines. And most countries are studying different things. Let's say, Italy. If their research is government-subsidized, they all work on the same thing. That's how we're a little bit different. Listen, researchers don't make a lot of money, and I think any way you can support them is so important. If you're in it for money, you're not going into research.

Charlebois: I just think about all the money the government wastes that could go to these studies.

Mishkin: I can't think about that. Because I'll get anxious (laughs). I just have to keep doing what I'm doing. I'm very passionate about the work. There are so many worthwhile charities and foundations working on diabetes. It's all about what's closest to you. I'm passionate about cancer research. I had it. My husband died from it. So that's what I'm doing. All of us are looking for money. The only way is through research, as far as I'm concerned, the only way. And prayer. There are a lot of miracles out there. I've seen a lot of miracles. But it just so happened that my husband's kind of cancer, everybody gets it dies off. When he was first diagnosed, he was given four months, and he lived 15 and a half months. There was no quality in it, because he was going through these terrible trials. The chemo makes you sick, and he was dizzy. I was the cheerleader. But looking back, I wonder if he hadn't done all those things, if the quality of the remainder of his life would have been better.

Cooper: That's always a big question.

Mishkin: We just do the best we can. I so badly wanted Jack to live. He had a real positive outlook. He was a wonderful man. He thought he was going to beat his cancer. My son tried to talk to him (about his prospects) once, and Jack got angry. So we all look on the attitude that he was going to make it, but he didn't.

The other day, I was talking to a young man whose father was very ill with pancreatic cancer. He said, "My dad sat down with me and started talking about things." I said, "This is your turning point. When they're ready to talk, they let you know. They've reached a point where they're not doing great. So if you have any questions you want to ask, now is the time, because he's talking."

Charlebois: My second cousin just died. He got cancer when he was 13 or 14, and died at 17. When I would go and see him, and he'd look fantastic. I'd think: "There's no way he's gonna die. Everything's gonna work out."

Mishkin: Cancer's a terrible, terrible disease.

Cooper: When I die I was really surprised.

(laughter)

Charlebois: I know a lot about dying. I die on stage once a week.

Schwartz: It's overrated, right?

Mishkin: I don't take anything for granted anymore...
KEVIN NEALON

Martirosyan: What is your connection with the event today?

Kevin Nealon: Steve DiMarco, who runs Golf On Earth Events, puts these fundraisers together. They'll call, and if it's something I believe in, I'll participate. But I have relatives who've had cancer, who've passed from cancer. The disease affects so many people, so I continue to support these types of events to help find a cure. It's fun to come out here and see everybody joining in together for the same cause. They've been making a lot of inroads on finding cures for cancer. It's not necessarily a death sentence anymore. It's something I think we can ultimately beat.

Martirosyan: Hopefully. Do you golf?

Nealon: I do.

Martirosyan: Regularly?

Nealon: No. That's why I don't golf that well. But I like to golf. It's one of those sports where I think, "Maybe I could be good at this." Unlike something like football or baseball, which takes more physical endurance.

Martirosyan: What are you competing for?

Nealon: I always compete against myself. I'm always trying to beat myself and be a better player. I do love that they have different incentives on each hole, and some of the holes, like the hole in one, you get whatever, a helicopter (helicopter passes overhead, making announcements)

Martirosyan: What are you working on these days?

Nealon: I'm on the road doing stand-up. People can go to my website to see me. I have a film I'm shooting next spring or summer. It's a dark romantic comedy.

Martirosyan: Oh, that'll be fun.

Nealon: It will be. It's gonna be a crowd-funded movie, just like this event today.

(laughter)

Everything is good.

Martirosyan: Can you tell us the name of the movie or is it a secret?

Nealon: Right now it's called The Pleaser.

Charlebois: Tell us a little about yourself. That's enough. I'm bored. No. If a train leaves Chicago going 45 miles an hour, and a bus leaves Indianapolis going 40 heading east, when will they intersect?

Nealon: I would take the train, cause it's a lot quicker. You save yourself. I don't know how many miles it is. They would intersect probably in Evanston.

Charlebois: I think you're right. If I recall. The math of that is about right.

(laughter)

Martirosyan: How did you meet the Jenkins?

Nealon: I like to keep that a secret.

(laughter)

Martirosyan: Okay, that's good! Let's go with that!

Charlebois: Are you gonna be up at the Ice House any time soon?

Nealon: Is it still there?

Charlebois: No wonder no one's at my shows!

(laughter)

Nealon: Jeff performs out at the Ice House occasionally, when they can't get anybody else. But he likes it out there.

Charlebois: I'm not half the man my sister is.

Nealon: Jeff is a very, very funny comedian... Whoa, I better get in my cart.

Charlebois: Did they team you up?

Nealon: Yeah, they team me up with some donors.

Charlebois: What's your football team?

Nealon: I don't own a football team.

Charlebois: If you were gonna root for a team, which would it be?...
Donald Faison: So, you play golf?

Maritrosyan: No, I pretend to play golf. I’m far from what you would call a good golfer, how about that?

Donald Faison: I wouldn’t know.

Faison: You don’t play golf?

Maritrosyan: Mini-golf doesn’t count, right?

Faison: Yeah, it does. It’s great for dates, too.

Maritrosyan: Maybe. How did you get connected with the event today?

Faison: My kids’ pediatrician, Peter Wolfstein, is a member here, and I think he’s on the board as well. He invited me. And then Steve DiMarco, does a bunch of golf events, and he was like, “This is the one you’ve got to show up for, buddy,” and I was like, “All right, I’ll be there.”

Maritrosyan: How have you been doing?

Faison: Today I’ve been having fun. That’s all that really matters.

Maritrosyan: Isn’t it a competition?

Faison: Yeah, it’s a competition, but if you treat it like a competition, you’re not gonna have any fun. This is one of those things where you’re competing, yes, but for the most part, it’s just great to be out in the open air on a Monday with weather like this. It’s not too hot and not too cold. It does look like it’s gonna rain on us, but we’ll see. And if it does, even better—no, not really.

Maritrosyan: A little rain is good. We haven’t been getting any.

Cooper: Wasn’t it in Caddyshack you went out on the course—

Faison: —and got struck by lightning—and lived!

(laughter)

And lived! The Reverend, actually, the Father.

Cooper: Yeah, he survived!

Faison: Yeah and gets struck by lightning.

Cooper: So remember that.

Faison: (laughs) If it starts raining, I’ll remember that. Even if it doesn’t start raining, I’ll remember that.

Cooper: Has cancer affected your life?

Faison: Oh, man, I lost my aunt and my grandma to cancer. It’s tough because we all feel invincible, and that can be a quick take-down.

Cooper: Did they die of different types of cancer?

Faison: So far it’s been breast cancer. My aunt beat it the first time, but it came back. She had such a horrible experience with chemo the first time that she was like, “I don’t want to do chemo again.” And she passed away really fast.

Maritrosyan: It’s monstrous.

Faison: I miss her every day, especially when her birthday comes around.

Charlebois: Are you from out here?

Faison: New York, born and raised.

Charlebois: Do you want to get out of the sunshine?

Maritrosyan: A little bit ago he was soaking up the sun.

Faison: And enjoying it.

Cooper: But the sun’ll give you cancer.

Faison: Everything will.

Maritrosyan: What are you up to these days?

Faison: Enjoying life, man, playing a lot of golf, hangin’ out with the family, working here and there.

Cooper: Do you have a handicap? Oh, no, I went there.

Charlebois: You son of a b’ch.

Faison: (laughs) Mine is a 12. What’s yours?

Charlebois: I don’t have one! Do you get to play a lot?

Faison: I do. My wife allows me to get out and play. We have two children, and even with that she’s like, “Go have fun.”

Charlebois: ‘Cause I heard you shot a 38 or something, but they weren’t sure about what you got on the second hole...