Our Annual MENSCH LIST

Nancy Mishkin, cancer survivor and sculptor
A Cancer Survivor Leads the Way

by Naomi Pfefferman, Arts & Entertainment Editor

In 2004, Nancy Mishkin, a professional sculptor and a philanthropist, was diagnosed with breast cancer. “I was scared to death. I was certain I was going to die,” she said.

Then she saw a physician at the Tower Hematology Oncology Medical Group in Beverly Hills who hugged me and said, “You’re going to live,” she recalled. “That’s what I needed to hear.”

A friend asked Mishkin to join the board of a separate nonprofit entity, Tower Cancer Research Foundation. Now she’s chairwoman of its board. Over the years, she and her husband, Jack, a successful carpet manufacturer, helped the organization raise more than $30 million for research and patient-support programs. She also founded the Magnolia Council, a women’s support group that raises more than $300,000 annually for the foundation.

She encountered cancer again in 2012, when doctors diagnosed Jack with mesothelioma, giving him just four months to live.

“He came home on a Monday and that afternoon, I knew he was dying,” she said. Taking part in clinical trials, he survived 14 months, dying at 66. “He wanted so badly to live, and we tried everything we could,” she said.

After his death, Mishkin worked with the foundation’s president, Dr. Solomon Hamburg, to establish a $1 million, three-year mesothelioma study at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. An annual golf tournament in Jack’s name has raised more than $1 million for mesothelioma research and other cutting-edge cancer studies.

Mishkin is the daughter of Polish-born concentration camp survivors who met and married after World War II in Germany, where Nancy was born. After the family moved to Corpus Christi, Texas, around 1950, her father — who had lost all of his relatives in the Holocaust — invited strangers to their shabbat dinner every week, even though the family was struggling financially.

Mishkin’s own philanthropic efforts began in earnest in the late 1970s, when she began raising funds for asthma research. In the 1980s, she created a bronze sculpture for the Children’s Burn Foundation, which pays for the multiple surgeries required by child burn victims. She became a member of the organization’s council and, among other efforts, helped arrange for a camp experience for the children.

“They could all see that they were burned,” she said. “But by the end of the day, they had their arms around each other and were swimming together.”

Later, Mishkin created and donated a sculpture of a boy holding a shell to his ear for Sonance, a support group for the House Ear Institute. She also helped raise money for the organization to provide cochlear implants for hearing-impaired children.

In the early 2000s, Mishkin began her four-year term as chairwoman of Beit T’Shuva, which provides recovery programs for Jewish and other addicts and their relatives. “People don’t realize what addiction does to families,” she said.

As board chairwoman of the Tower Cancer Research Foundation, Mishkin helps raise funds for studies that evaluate the disease on a molecular level. The foundation helps support research on how cancer alters DNA, how to tailor treatment for individual patients, and using viruses to target cancer cells.

On another front, Mishkin serves as president of the Diadames, which raises scholarship funds for highly gifted children to attend private school.

“I can’t imagine living without giving back,” she said.

“People don’t realize what addiction does to families.”