

Through continued advocacy and events, Kidney Cancer Coalition helps create hope for patients



Brenda and Ralph Knapp (center) present a check for \$105,000 - a portion of their total \$410,500 - to Drs. James Brugarolas (left) and Hans Hammer.

By Erin Prather Stafford

Ralph Knapp's life drastically changed on June 9, 2014. He and his wife, Brenda, knew something was amiss, but the grim diagnosis of kidney cancer

that had metastasized to his lungs left the couple in complete shock. Only 53 years old at the time, Mr. Knapp was told he had only two to three years to live.

Determined to outlive that short projection, Mr. Knapp became a patient of [Dr. Hans Hammers](#), an internationally recognized medical oncologist then at Johns Hopkins, where he led its medical oncology efforts in kidney cancer before coming to UT Southwestern in 2016.

“I’m thankful that I found Hans,” said Mr. Knapp. “My wife and I travel to UT Southwestern from Virginia to remain with him, and we believe the Medical Center has the best team of doctors in the country for kidney cancer. I’ve truly been blessed and want to do what I can to help others.”

Nearly 63,000 new cases of kidney cancer are diagnosed in the United States each year, making it one of the 10 most prevalent types of cancer in both men and women. Unlike most other cancer types, kidney cancer doesn’t respond to chemotherapy, which, until 2005, resulted in only one approved treatment regimen for the disease. Kidney cancer also does not respond to conventional radiation therapy.

Dr. Hammers, an Associate Professor of Internal Medicine in the Division of Hematology and Oncology, has played a major role in the development of immunotherapy, a form of treatment that boosts the body’s own immune defenses to help fight cancer. He was the principal investigator on several industry- and investigator-sponsored clinical trials, some of which involved Mr. Knapp as a participant.

“Unfortunately, there’s a lack of funding for kidney cancer research,” said Mrs. Knapp. “My husband becoming a patient of Hans made us aware of the challenges researchers face, and we were inspired to start our nonprofit, the Kidney Cancer Coalition. We personally cover all administrative costs so every dollar raised goes directly to kidney cancer researchers.”

Recently, the Kidney Cancer Coalition donated \$305,500 to UT Southwestern for an investigator-initiated immunotherapy clinical trial overseen by Dr. Hammers.

“Since FDA approval of more modern immunotherapies, the whole landscape of kidney cancer treatment is changing,” said Dr. Hammers. “We expect it to continue changing very rapidly, which is why this gift is so important. Even while Ralph battles his own cancer, he and Brenda have ensured we can continue improving new therapies in combination with other targeted therapies, and even radiation, to potentially increase a patient’s response to them.”

After coming to UT Southwestern, Dr. Hammers joined forces with [Dr. James Brugarolas](#), Director of the Medical Center’s [Kidney Cancer Program \(KCP\)](#). One of two specialized programs of research excellence designated by the National Cancer Institute, the KCP includes more than 20 physicians, many of whom are renowned international leaders in their fields of urology, pediatric oncology, adult oncology, radiation oncology, radiology, and pathology. Additionally, more than 40 UT Southwestern scientists and their research laboratories are part of the program.

“Ralph and Brenda are a wonderful couple and terrific advocates for curing kidney cancer,” said Dr. Brugarolas, Associate Professor of Internal Medicine in the Department’s Hematology and Oncology Division.

Last summer, the [Kidney Cancer Coalition](#) held a Rock the Cure event in the couple’s hometown of Virginia Beach, raising \$105,000 for the KCP at UT Southwestern. The organization supported a similar Rock the Cure event locally in February. This event, co-chaired by KCP patient advocates Merlinda Chelette and Anita Bird, raised more than \$100,000 for the Kidney Cancer Program.

“UT Southwestern has a history of landmark discoveries advancing understanding of kidney cancer,” said [Dr. Daniel K. Podolsky](#), President of UT Southwestern. “Thanks to the Kidney Cancer Coalition’s mission to accelerate research, we can continue our efforts to save patients’ lives by developing new treatments. Their gift provides additional momentum for this vital work.”

Dr. Brugarolas is a Virginia Murchison Linthicum Scholar in Medical Research.

Dr. Hammers is the first Eugene P. Frenkel, M.D. Scholar in Clinical Medicine.

Dr. Podolsky holds the Philip O'Bryan Montgomery, Jr., M.D. Distinguished Presidential Chair in Academic Administration, and the Doris and Bryan Wildenthal Distinguished Chair in Medical Science.

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