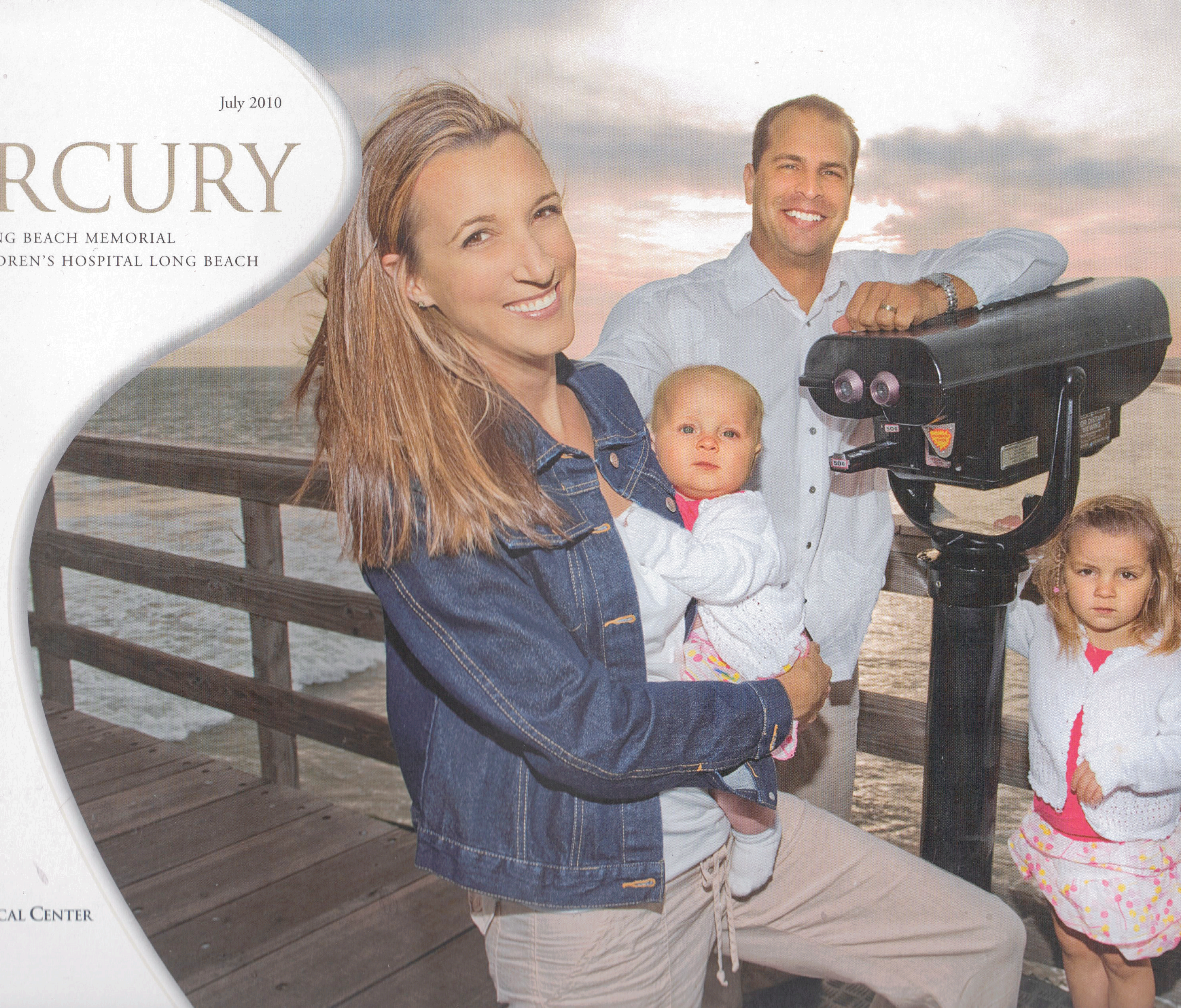


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MERCURY

LONG BEACH MEMORIAL
MILLER CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL LONG BEACH





From the Mysteries of the

by Carol A. Beckerman

Beating the Odds

When Pat Merwin was diagnosed with cancer 18 months ago, she was in a state of disbelief. It was like a fog set in. Lung cancer? "No, I'm going on vacation next month, this can't be!"

Recently, Pat listened to her oncologist, Robert Nagourney, MD, speak to a group of patients about "The Cancer Bubble." No other medical diagnosis seems to trigger the same type of overwhelming human response.

One year after she started the cycle of treatment and post-treatment testing, Pat felt the roller coaster ride was getting the best of her. Dr. Nagourney referred her to Mariusz Wirga, MD, medical director of the Psychosocial Oncology Program at the Todd Cancer Institute (TCI). She met with Dr. Wirga and felt his approach held the answers to maintaining a balanced life. When the outpatient program, *Beat the Odds* started a new session, she attended.

Other cancer patients have found their way to this life enhancing 8-week series of classes, which addresses ways to increase energy, manage stress, as well as find support and learn effective communication methods.

Bernie Beskind is no stranger to cancer. He has heard the words, "You have cancer," four times – for four different cancer types!

For several years, Bernie volunteered at the Leavey Radiation Oncology Center. During this time he met Dr. Wirga. When he received the news about his latest diagnosis, Dr. Wirga suggested he join the *Beat the Odds* program.

A Life's Passion

Dr. Wirga is a psychiatrist with a unique background. He began his medical residency in Pathology, but found it

wasn't his calling. So, he switched to Radiation Oncology. Quickly he concluded working on a more personal level with cancer patients would be far more rewarding.

In the 1970s and 80s, many international studies investigated the impact of psychosocial support for cancer patients. In 1981, Carl Simonton, MD, a radiation oncologist and pioneer of psycho-oncology, published a paper demonstrating this type of intervention doubled a patient's median survival time, increased the number of long-term survivors and improved their quality of life. Since then, many other studies have provided overwhelming evidence that holistic care of the cancer patient has a significant positive impact.

In 1988, Dr. Wirga began working with Dr. Simonton. He moved to Long Beach in 2003, to establish the Psychosocial Program at TCI.

Meaningful Results

Donna Kastner is thankful for the positive influence *Beat the Odds* has had on her life. Cancer-free for 13 years, Donna was shocked to learn her breast cancer had recurred. The program has helped her accept "... that things are OK the way they are. We are so achievement oriented in our society. This course has helped me to just be. I don't need to jump hurdles all the time."

Pat, Bernie and Donna all agree that learning to turn off negative thoughts and worry is a valuable tool. Bernie appreciates the "tricks" learned in class, especially "conscious breathing." He says, "It helps to de-escalate stress."

Pat values what Dr. Wirga brings personally to the group, "He has an enormous amount of positive energy." She enjoys the spiritual component of the sessions – not religious she points out, but the coursework recognizes

Mind to the Science of Genetics



spirituality as a significant component to getting well.

Donna appreciates that patients can bring a guest to the classes. She felt her husband gained a better perspective of what is important in life. "As a family, we have learned to play more," says Donna. "It is really a great program."

Knowing the Risks

Carey Cullinane, MD, MPH, surgical oncologist and genetist, has been director of the Cancer Risk and Prevention Program at the TCI since 2004. Dr. Cullinane and her staff perform gene testing and counseling.

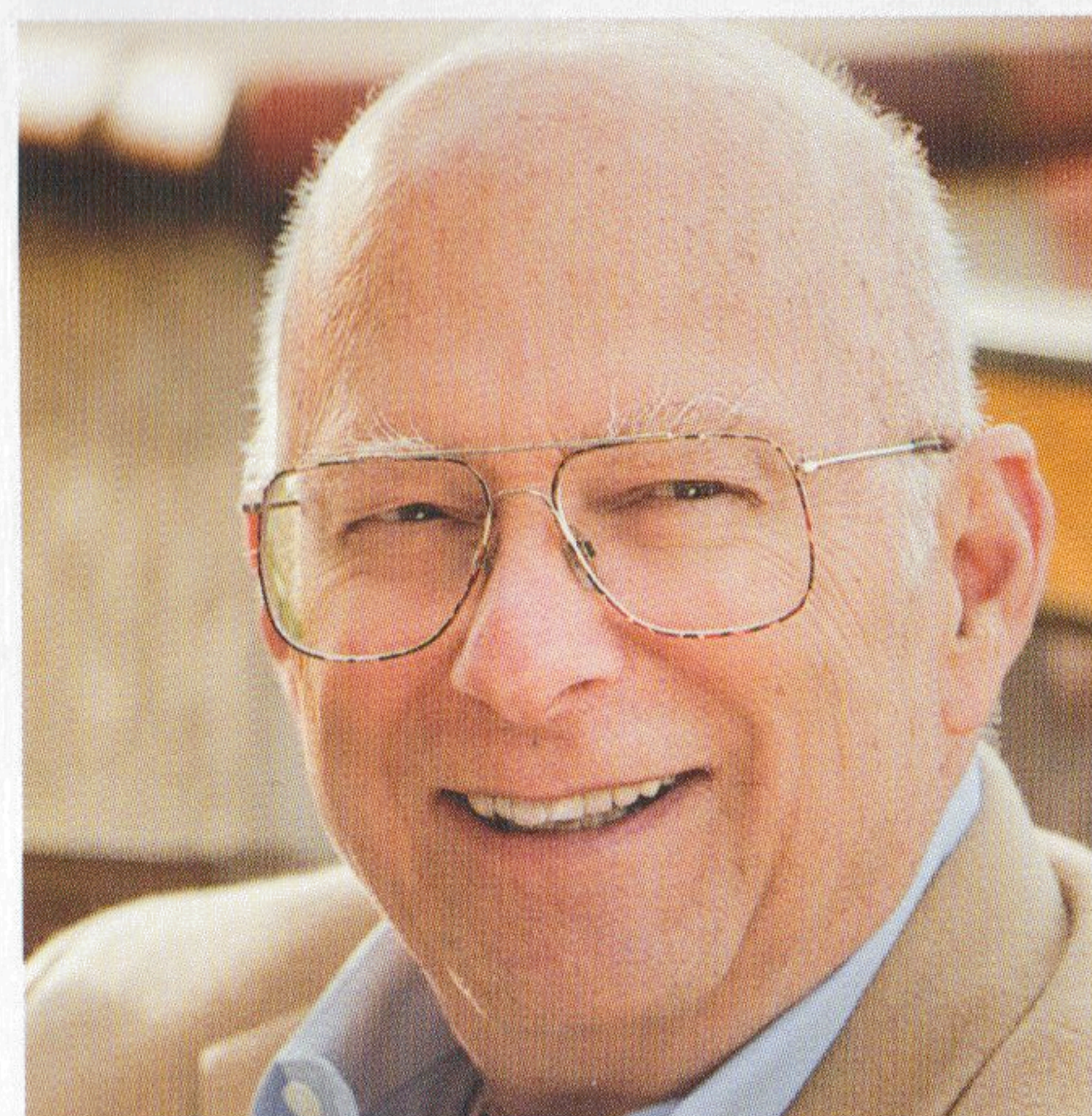
The Program works primarily with those at risk for breast and ovarian cancer. Others seek information about their risk for diseases such as Alzheimer's. Also, Dr. Cullinane works to educate medical staff on the benefits of referring "at risk" patients for counseling.

The goal of counseling is to provide patients with information so they can make informed decisions about plans to have children, preventative surgery and treatment options should a disease develop.



Support Team

From left: Mentor Program for Women with Cancer Manager Randal Snyder; Holly C. Adams, LCSW; Amy Baker, MSW; and Erin Sommerville, Oncology Life Coach.



Psychosocial Oncology Program at the Todd Cancer Institute

Research has proven the positive impact on patient outcomes by adding psychological services to cancer care. Patients like Pat Merwin (far left), Bernie Beskind (above left), and Donna Kastner (above center), appreciate the insight and support from the program's Medical Director Mariuz Wirga, MD.