Cancer Health 25: Quality of Life

These remarkable individuals are helping people affected by cancer live their best lives.

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Acupuncture. Sleep. Exercise. Palliative care. Fertility. Sexual health. Financial lifelines. Legal protections. Health equity. Side effects relief. Heart health. Yoga. Survivorship. These are some of the many paths toward enhancing quality of life, the theme of the third annual Cancer Health 25 list. Each of these individuals does extraordinary work to improve the lives of people with cancer. It is our honor to celebrate them.

Sonia Ancoli-Israel, PhD

San Diego, California

Sonia Ancoli-Israel, PhDCourtesy of Sonia Ancoli-Israel

Sonia Ancoli-Israel, PhD, spent nearly 30 years studying sleep, fatigue and circadian rhythms in people undergoing cancer treatment. Good sleep, which can be elusive for people with cancer, is essential to quality of life and plays a role in response to treatment and recovery. Ancoli-Israel, 70, was a professor in the department of psychiatry at the University of California San Diego School of Medicine and the director of the Sleep Disorders Clinic at the Veterans Affairs San Diego Healthcare System. Now retired, her groundbreaking research, primarily in women with breast cancer, has shown that sleep, fatigue and circadian rhythms worsen during chemotherapy and that exposure to morning bright light can alleviate the associated symptoms.

Ting Bao, MD

New York, New York

Ting Bao, MDCourtesy of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

Ting Bao, MD, 47, the director of Integrative Breast Oncology at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, takes an integrative medicine approach to cancer care, helping patients maintain the best quality of life possible and supporting their treatment goals. Her holistic approach includes diet and lifestyle changes, mind-body therapies, exercise, massage therapy and acupuncture. Born and raised in Beijing, Bao is a board-certified acupuncturist who uses the traditional Chinese medicine technique to reduce treatment-related side effects. Her research aims to better understand the mechanisms and efficacy of acupuncture, yoga and other complementary therapies. Her goal, she says, is “to develop and deliver state-of-the-art, evidence-based integrative oncology care to enhance and potentially extend survival for cancer patients.”

Craig D. Blinderman, MD

New York, New York

Craig D. Blinderman, MDCourtesy of Craig Blinderman/Alan Bresson

Since the mid 2000s, Craig D. Blinderman, MD, 47, has been advocating for integrating palliative care into a patient's regular cancer treatment early on. He is the director of the adult palliative care service at Columbia University Medical Center/New York–Presbyterian Hospital in New York City. In 2010, Blinderman coauthored a groundbreaking study that found that lung cancer patients who received early palliative care were better able to manage their symptoms and pain, enjoyed better quality of life and survived longer. Blinderman is a believer in applying the principles of Buddhism—including listening to others and being fully present in the moment—to the practice of medicine. That means paying attention to what is most important to his patients and to their families.

Lisa Simms Booth

Washington, DC

Lisa Simms BoothCourtesy of Lisa Simms Booth/Paul Bliese

Lisa Simms Booth already had deep roots in community activism and social justice when she unwittingly became a patient advocate. It was 2003, and her mom was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The subsequent eight years, through her mom's death, informed her leadership roles at the Milken Institute's FasterCures center and later at the Biden Cancer Initiative. Currently the executive director of the Smith Center for Healing and the Arts, in Washington, DC, Booth, 55, is expanding the center's reach as a leader in the movement to promote the power of arts in healing. The center develops and promotes healing practices for people with cancer and their caregivers that explore physical, emotional and mental resources that lead to life-affirming changes.

Monica Fawzy Bryant, JD

Chicago, Illinois

Monica Fawzy Bryant, JDCourtesy of Triage Cancer

A distinguished cancer rights attorney, Monica Fawzy Bryant, JD, 41, dedicates her time and expertise to helping people with cancer and their caregivers understand the practical and legal problems they may face. Bryant carries out this work through Triage Cancer, a nonprofit she founded with her sister in 2012. As chief operating officer, Bryant oversees the organization, whose mission is to give people living with cancer access to all the resources they need. She also shares her knowledge with others through seminars, media and publications. Bryant is the coauthor of Cancer Rights Law, the first and only book on this subject.

Linda E. Carlson, PhD

Calgary, Canada

Linda E. Carlson, PhDCourtesy of the University of Calgary/Svetlana Yanova

The Enbridge Research Chair in Psychosocial Oncology at the University of Calgary Cumming School of Medicine in Canada, Linda E. Carlson, PhD, 52, has been studying the effects of mindfulness-based programs on cancer survivors for 25 years. One of her studies found that a yoga and mindfulness program was more effective than group therapy for alleviating lingering stress and anxiety in breast cancer survivors. This research also revealed that combining yoga with mindfulness helps keep protective cell structures known as telomeres from becoming shorter, which occurs with long-term stress. Carlson has worked hard to remove barriers for cancer patients who cannot attend the program. She published Mindfulness-Based Cancer Recovery and

partnered with eMindful.com to create a 12-week program anyone can access online.

Tony Christon-Walker

Birmingham, Alabama

Tony Christon-WalkerCourtesy of Tony Christon-Walker

As a Black, gay, HIV-positive father in the South, Tony Christon-Walker, 55, has always known what it's like not to see yourself reflected in your health care system. But when the HIV advocate and author was diagnosed with colorectal cancer in 2014, he recalls, he received suboptimal care—that is, until he found the Cancer Treatment Centers of America (CTCA) in Georgia. Their process "was great," says Christon-Walker, who is now cancer-free, "but I didn't see anyone that looked or identified as I did in the support process." So he joined CTCA's Cancer Fighters program

to help fill that gap. He also shared his insights with the team rebuilding President Biden's Cancer Moonshot, which earned him an invitation to the White House for the program's launch.

Lorenzo Cohen, PhD

Houston, Texas

Lorenzo Cohen, PhDCourtesy of MD Anderson Cancer Center

Improving the quality of life and clinical outcomes for people in cancer treatment and educating the public about an anticancer lifestyle are key motivators for Lorenzo Cohen, PhD, 58, the director of the Integrative Medicine Program at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. A founding member (and past president) of the Society for Integrative Oncology, Cohen provides clinical care and conducts research on meditation, yoga, tai chi, qi

gong, massage, diet, exercise, acupuncture and other integrative strategies to alleviate side effects of treatment and improve quality of life and clinical outcomes. He is a registered yoga teacher and, with his wife, coauthor of the book Anticancer Living.

Don S. Dizon, MD

Providence, Rhode Island

Don S. Dizon, MDCourtesy of Don S. Dizon

Don Dizon, MD, specializes in women's cancers, but to many, he's best known for his work promoting sexual health after cancer treatment for both women and men, his advocacy for LGBTQ people living with cancer and his social media presence. Dizon, 52, is founder of the Sexual Health First Responders Clinic at the Lifespan Cancer Institute at Rhode Island Hospital and a professor of

medicine at the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University. A gay man with three children, he is on a mission to make oncology clinical trials more inclusive of LGBTQ people. As a founding member of the Collaboration for Outcomes in Social Media in Oncology, he recognizes the importance of direct communication among patients, doctors and researchers.

Chris Draft

Atlanta, Georgia

Chris DraftCourtesy of Chris Draft

In 2010, after 12 years in the NFL, linebacker Chris Draft retired, ready to settle down with longtime sweetheart Keasha Rutledge. A few months later, she was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer. “She was 37 years old, in amazing shape and did not have a smoking history,” Draft, 46,

told Stand Up To Cancer, a group he collaborates with to fund cancer research projects. “We learned the most important fact about lung cancer—that anyone can get it.” Rutledge died in 2011, but not before she and Draft got married and launched the Chris Draft Family Foundation and the Team Draft initiative, with its annual Super Bowl Challenge, to raise awareness about lung cancer, promote screenings and improve quality of life. “Early detection,” he notes, “is a game changer in transforming the survival rate in lung cancer.”

Eileen Z. Fuentes

New York, New York

Eileen Z. FuentesCourtesy of Eileen Fuentes

Eileen Z. Fuentes was 34, juggling a job and a family, when she was diagnosed with Stage II triple-

negative breast cancer. She had aggressive treatment, including chemo and a double mastectomy, then gave herself a crash course in nutrition and complementary techniques to help her heal. She became certified as a holistic health coach and patient navigator and worked as a patient navigator at Columbia University Medical Center's Herbert Irving Cancer Center, where she led bilingual wellness classes. Now 48, Fuentes has a master's degree in health education and manages the patient relations department at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City. Her passion: helping people with cancer, particularly Latina and Black women, on their journey from illness to wellness.

Patricia Ganz, MD

Los Angeles, California

Patricia Ganz, MDCourtesy of UCLA Health

Before it was established practice, oncologist Patricia Ganz, MD, pioneered the assessment of physical and emotional quality of life for people with cancer. She helped create the field of cancer survivorship. Her goal is to ensure that patients' voices are included in treatment decisions. Ganz, whose career spans more than 40 years, is a professor in the School of Medicine and in the School of Public Health at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and director of UCLA's Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center. In a UCLA interview, she said, "You never know when you treat a patient whether they will be a survivor or not. And when you are successful, it's magic."

Loriana Hernandez-Aldama

Atlanta, Georgia

Loriana HernandezAldamaCourtesy of Loriana Herandez-Aldama

Emmy Award–winning TV anchor and health reporter Loriana Hernandez-Aldama, 49, uses her journalism skills to share the lessons she learned while overcoming acute myeloid leukemia in 2014 and then, five years later, breast cancer. She believes everyday wellness—from diet and physical fitness to spiritual and financial health—prepares us to overcome future health crises, a concept she calls “pre-habilitation”—hence her book’s title, Becoming the Story: The Power of PREhab. As the founder and CEO of ArmorUp for Life, a patient-advocacy group, she speaks out for underserved and marginalized communities and encourages everyone to improve their health, get fitter, reduce risks and enjoy a higher quality of life.

Sandeep (Anu) Kaur, RDN

Ashburn, Virginia

Sandeep (Anu) Kaur, RDNCourtesy of Sandeep (Anu) Kaur/Ginny Filer Photography

When Sandeep (Anu) Kaur, RDN, 50, first worked with cancer patients as a registered dietitian, her patients shared their stresses and fears with her. Over time, she responded to these deep concerns by evolving her practice to embrace nourishment of the mind and the body. Her own bout with ovarian cancer as well as her Kundalini and Hatha yoga practice taught her that a mind-body approach could complement medical treatment. She launched the courses Befriending Cancer and Nutrition to Nourishment to teach cancer survivors the principles of food as medicine to help them make lifelong lifestyle changes, embrace compassionate self-care and enhance immunity by reducing inflammation. Kaur is also a nutritional consultant for the National Cancer Institute's division of cancer prevention.

Bonnie Ky, MD

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Bonnie Ky, MDCourtesy of Penn Medicine

Growing up in Queens, New York, Bonnie Ky, MD, learned key lessons from her Taiwanese immigrant parents: an unconditional love of family, a tireless work ethic, and empathy and caring for those around her. She harnesses those values in her work in cardio-oncology, a new field that focuses on the detection, monitoring and treatment of cardiovascular disease after cancer treatment. She leads a clinical translational program funded by the National Institutes of Health and the American Heart Association and has authored more than 180 papers on topics such as how treatments for breast, kidney, prostate and lung cancers and lymphomas affect cardiovascular risk. Ky is the inaugural editor of the journal JACC: CardioOncology and a tenured associate professor of cardio-oncology at the University of Pennsylvania. “Cardiotoxicity,” she told The ASCO Post, “is detectable, treatable and preventable.”

Charles Loprinzi, MD

Rochester, Minnesota

Charles Loprinzi, MDCourtesy of Mayo Clinic

Reducing distressing symptoms of cancer and its treatments is the life's work of Charles Loprinzi, MD, 69, a medical oncologist who has worked at the Mayo Clinic Cancer Center in Rochester, Minnesota, since 1985. He previously served as codirector of the center's cancer prevention and control program. Loprinzi leads a team that has conducted more than 150 clinical trials aimed at understanding and minimizing symptoms related to cancer and its treatments, including chemotherapy-induced neuropathy and cancer-related lack of appetite and weight loss. Much of his work has focused on helping to improve quality of life for breast cancer patients during and after treatment.

Maryam Lustberg, MD, MPH

New Haven, Connecticut

Maryam Lustberg, MD, MPHCourtesy of Maryam Lustberg

Maryam Lustberg, MD, MPH, 47, the director of the Breast Center at Smilow Cancer Hospital and chief of breast medical oncology at the Yale Cancer Center, specializes in improving long-term outcomes for breast cancer patients who have developed side effects from treatment. But her interests extend beyond managing side effects to encompass a broader vision of supportive care for patients and survivors across all cancers. She is the president of the Multinational Association of Supportive Care in Cancer and an associate editor for the Journal of Cancer Survivorship. Lustberg collaborates with national patient advocacy organizations with a focus on improving shared decision-making and increasing patient engagement in clinical trials. She is also known for her mentorship of up-and-coming oncologists.

Smitha Mallaiah, MSc, C-IAYT

Houston, Texas

Smitha Mallaiah, MSc, C-IAYTCourtesy of MD Anderson Cancer Center

Smitha Mallaiah, MSc, C-IAYT, 35, a senior mind-body intervention specialist at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, focuses on integrating evidence-informed yoga therapy into conventional cancer care. Working alongside other integrative medicine clinicians, Mallaiah provides yoga therapy to inpatients and outpatients from diagnosis to treatment and through the end of life. On the research side, she develops and evaluates yoga interventions designed for people with different types of cancer. “Yoga is not just a physical exercise—it is a mind-body discipline and a way of life,” Mallaiah says. “Mind-body practices, such as yoga, give people the opportunity to accept their situation and face it and feel more in control.”

Melvin Mann

Atlanta, Georgia

Melvin MannCourtesy of Melvin Mann

Diagnosed with chronic myeloid leukemia (CML) at age 37 and given three years to live, Melvin Mann enrolled in the first clinical trial for a targeted therapy for CML in 1998. Now 65, Mann has the distinction of being the longest living patient on that drug (Gleevec), and his mission is to pass on his good fortune. He runs marathons and does bike races to raise money for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society (LLS) and organizes drives for the nonprofit Be The Match, which supports bone marrow transplants. He worked with LLS to extend the reach of Myeloma Link, which spreads blood cancer awareness to Black people, who are disproportionately affected by this disease.

Ann Partridge, MD, MPH

New Bedford, Massachusetts

Ann Partridge, MD, MPHCourtesy of Dana-Farber Cancer Institute/Sam Ogden

A dedication to improving care and outcomes for people with breast cancer during and after treatment has helped make Ann Partridge, MD, MPH, 52, a leader in the field of cancer survivorship for people with all kinds of cancer. The Boston-based oncologist is the director of the Adult Survivorship Program at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, where she leads a team that helps patients live their best lives beyond cancer. She is also the cofounder and director of Dana-Farber's Young and Strong Program for Adults with Breast Cancer, which provides young adults with the comprehensive care, support and education they need to survive and thrive. Her research explores the medical and psychosocial issues that these patients can face at diagnosis, during treatment and throughout survivorship.

Joseph E. Ravenell, MD

New York, New York

Joseph E. Ravenell, MDNYU Langone Health;

Unlike the doctor’s office, which many Black men associate with fear and mistrust, the barbershop is a safe haven and a place of loyalty and trust, according to Joseph E. Ravenell, MD, 48, an associate professor of medicine at the NYU Grossman School of Medicine in New York City. Through the Men’s Health Initiative, a network of more than 200 barbershops and other community institutions in New York City, Ravenell helps thousands of older Black men detect and treat hypertension, colorectal cancer and prostate cancer. His community outreach also brings better breast cancer care to underserved women and helps reduce cancer burdens in immigrant communities in Brooklyn.

Kathryn Schmitz, PhD, MPH

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Kathryn Schmitz, PhD, MPHCourtesy of Penn Medicine

A former dancer and exercise instructor, Kathryn Schmitz, 59, PhD, MPH, has played a major role in establishing the clinical benefits of exercise for cancer survivors. The distinguished professor of public health sciences at Pennsylvania State University's College of Medicine has published seminal work on exercise and breast-cancer-related lymphedema, written books for the public and professionals alike and helped establish the Strength After Breast Cancer rehabilitation program. As president of the American College of Sports Medicine, Schmitz led the Moving Through Cancer program, which aims to ensure that all people living with and beyond cancer are engaged in appropriate exercise and rehabilitation programming as a standard of care. As she told the

National Cancer Institute, “My hope is that someday, if you ask anyone walking down the street whether exercise is valuable for cancer survivors, the response will be an emphatic yes.”

Christine Verini

New York, New York

Christine VeriniCourtesy of CancerCare

Christine Verini is the executive vice president and chief operating officer at CancerCare, a national organization that supports quality of life for people affected by cancer by providing a range of free professional emotional, practical and financial support services. Verini oversees day-to-day operations, including social services, business development, financial assistance and communications. In 2019, Verini was named one of PharmaVOICE magazine’s 100 most inspiring

people. Verini also serves on the board of HealthyWomen, which works to help women make informed health choices, and as cochair of the Metastatic Breast Cancer Alliance Awareness Task force.

Samantha Watson

Boston, Massachusetts

Samantha WatsonCourtesy of Expect Miracles Foundation

Samantha Watson, 44, is no stranger to medical bills. She had cancer twice—bone cancer as a senior in college and leukemia nearly two years later. By the time she was cancer-free, she'd fallen behind her classmates—she had no job experience and plenty of debt. She started The Samfund in 2003 to help young adult cancer survivors like her. Over the past 19 years, the fund

has given out over $3 million to help young cancer survivors pay for everyday necessities, like groceries and rent, and provided information and support, since having cancer in your 20s or 30s can be isolating. As Watson learned firsthand, cancer isn't free. But when you're in danger of falling off a financial cliff, she says, The Samfund can help catch you.

Terri Woodard, MD

Houston, Texas

Terri Woodard, MDCourtesy of MD Anderson Cancer Center

A devoted advocate for expanding access to fertility care for people affected by cancer, Terri Woodard, MD, 46, established the Oncofertility Program at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in 2012. It offers comprehensive fertility preservation and family-building services

for men, women and children. Woodard’s research focuses on the psychosocial aspects of fertility preservation, including interventions that promote effective decision-making and alleviate the distress associated with potential cancer-related infertility. An associate professor in the Department of Gynecologic Oncology and Reproductive Medicine at MD Anderson, Woodard and her team created the award-winning, interactive web-based decision aid Pathways, which supports women with cancer who may be considering fertility preservation.

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