Cancer Health 25: Samantha Watson

Helping young adult cancer survivors pay down their staggering medical bills and catch up to their peers in education and careers

June 19, 2022 By Cancer Health Staff

The Cancer Health 25 is an annual list that honors individuals who have made a difference in the lives of people with cancer. This year's theme is quality of life. To see the full list, click here.

Not every cancer survivor has been able to get a bill through Congress, but Samantha Watson, 44, managed to do just that. The Deferment for Active Cancer Treatment Act, passed as part of an omnibus bill in 2018, lets cancer patients defer their outstanding student loans for six months during active treatment. This is just one of the ways in which Watson helps young adult cancer survivors stave off financial ruin.

Watson is no stranger to medical costs. In 1999, while a senior at Brandeis University, she was diagnosed with Ewing sarcoma, a bone cancer that primarily affects adolescents and young adults. She took a leave of absence to get treated at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSK) in New York City before returning to earn her bachelor's degree. Right before graduation, she was diagnosed with cancer again—this time, a form of leukemia brought about by her chemotherapy treatments. That required a bone marrow transplant.

Treatment at MSK brought with it big medical bills, including one for $274,000, as she told the Brandeis alumni magazine. But being in a financial hole wasn't her only setback. She also felt she'd fallen behind classmates who had launched careers while she'd been getting chemo and surgery.

That's a challenge that all young adults with cancer face. Starting a career and building relationships not only costs money, as Watson wrote, it takes confidence, resources, good health and a support system.

That's why in 2003 she started The Samfund, which provides financial help to young adults with cancer, to help them pay their rent or mortgage and cover other daily expenses, such as transportation and groceries, after treatment. But it's also a place where cancer survivors in their 20s and 30s can get information and support. And that last one is important. Cancer patients in your 20s are usually the youngest or oldest people in most support groups, something Watson learned firsthand.

Since 2003, The Samfund has given over $3 million in grants to young adults, helping them get back on their feet. And in 2019, it joined forces with the Expect Miracles Foundation, which rallies supporters from the financial services industry to fund cancer research and support people with cancer. Cancer isn't free, as the Samfund's tagline notes. But Watson hopes that Samfund programs will be there for younger cancer patients before they're in danger of falling off a financial cliff.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/article/cancer-health-25-samantha-watson