

Damon Runyon Honors Cancer Therapy Pioneer Renier Brentjens at Annual Breakfast

The Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation raised over \$1.1 million to support early-career scientist.

July 28, 2025 By [Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation](#)

The Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation held its Annual Breakfast at The Metropolitan Club in New York on Wednesday, June 11, 2025. The event raised over \$1.1 million to support promising early-career scientists pursuing innovative strategies to prevent, diagnose, and treat all forms of cancer.

The Breakfast honored cellular therapy pioneer Renier Brentjens, MD, PhD, Deputy Director and Chair of Medicine at Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center. A former Damon Runyon-Lilly Clinical Investigator, Dr. Brentjens contributed to the development of the first FDA-approved CAR-T cell therapy, which has revolutionized the treatment of blood cancers.

“When we started, there were maybe five to ten labs in the world that worked on CAR T cells,” he recalled. “Now there are over 200 companies developing them. The concept ballooned over the course of my career from something that was considered fringe to something that is now routine—and Damon Runyon was there at the beginning.”

In championing the idea that a patient’s own immune cells could be engineered to target their cancer cells, Dr. Brentjens exemplified the Foundation’s belief that progress in medicine requires taking some risks. Following in this tradition, Damon Runyon-Timmerman Traverse Clinical Investigator Lachelle D. Weeks, MD, PhD, of Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, is developing a computerized model to predict a patient’s likelihood of developing blood cancer based on images of their blood cells.

“My central hypothesis is that it will be possible one day to predict and prevent blood cancers like acute myeloid leukemia,” she said. “I’m so thankful that this is aligned with Damon Runyon’s ethos of funding projects that others might consider too ‘out there.’”

William G. Kaelin, Jr., MD, 2019 Nobel Laureate and Damon Runyon Board Member, speaks at the 2025 breakfast
Courtesy of Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation

Breakfast attendees also heard from Damon Runyon-Bakewell Foundation Innovator Daniel J. Puleston, PhD, at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, who has pioneered a new way to investigate cancer by keeping tumor-bearing organs alive outside of the body. His current research involves treating tumor-laden livers with immunotherapy drugs and tracing how the drugs are metabolized.

The event concluded with impassioned and rousing remarks from William G. Kaelin, Jr., MD, 2019 Nobel Laureate and Damon Runyon Board Member, about the dire impact of the federal government's proposed funding cuts to scientific research.

"As a scientist, I am asking not only for your financial support this year, but also your political and moral support," he implored those gathered. "America's 'Open for Business' sign—that for nearly a century has beckoned the best and brightest from around the world to come here to do science—is about to be turned off."

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