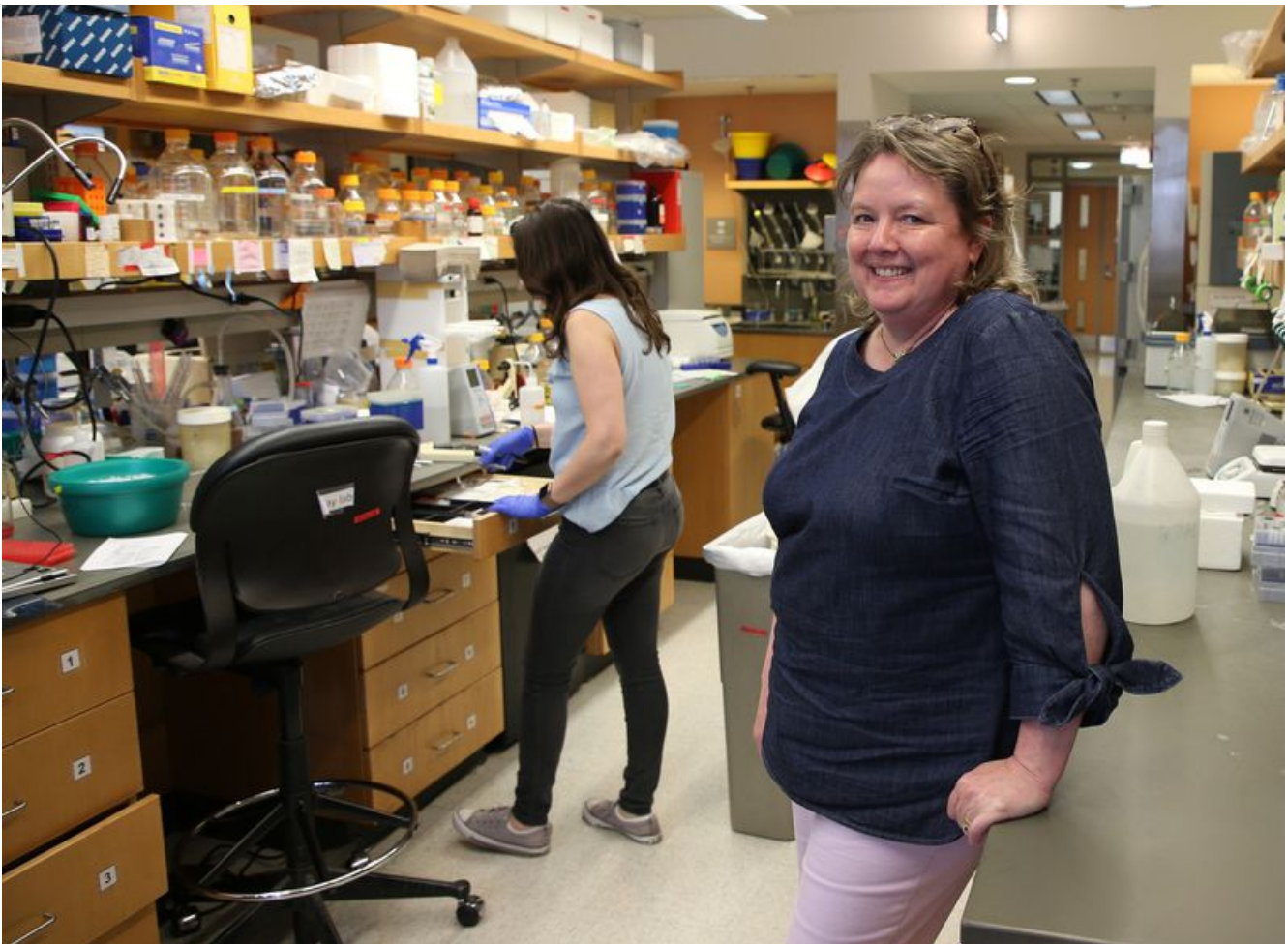


‘We want to give money directly to research’: Softball tournament propels search for cure for breast cancer

By ELIZA FAWCETT
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Dr. Kay Macleod, right, a University of Chicago researcher who investigates the role of mitochondria in the spread of cancer, in her lab July 2, 2019. (Terrence Antonio James / Chicago Tribune)

Logan Poole, a 27-year-old Ph.D. candidate, opened the cover of a large white centrifuge, inserted tubes of samples, and set the machine spinning.

Poole is a researcher in Dr. Kay Macleod's lab in the Ben May Department for Cancer Research at the University of Chicago. The Macleod Lab investigates how the metabolism of mitochondria — a cell organelle that breaks down nutrients and produces energy — is linked to the spread of breast cancer to other parts of the body.

“We have shown that increased mitochondrial activity is associated with a worse prognosis and increased metastasis,” Macleod said.

Her lab also tests drugs that regulate mitochondrial metabolism, hoping to determine if one might offer a way to block the progression of breast cancer. The centrifuge is an essential part of Macleod's work, since it allows her researchers to isolate specific cells and organelles for future testing. But the reason the machine can whirl away in her lab has less to do with science than with softball.

Macleod was able to purchase the centrifuge 18 months ago with funds raised by more than 1,000 softball players participating in the annual Ginger Rugai Y-Me Softball Tournament, which has been held every summer in Chicago for the past 24 years.

Since 2014, Macleod's lab has received key financial support from the tournament — last year, to the tune of \$70,000. Macleod has used the money to pay the salary of her lab manager and buy new equipment such as the centrifuge, she said. The tournament's costs are kept extremely low so that as much money as possible can go to Macleod's work, according to Rugai, the former longtime alderman of the 19th Ward.

“We want to find a cure,” Rugai said. “We want to give money directly to research.”

Macleod started her lab at the University of Chicago in 2002, after completing postdoctoral work at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a doctorate in

her native Scotland. For her, the research is personal: her mother and aunt were both diagnosed with breast cancer. But it can be challenging to secure federal funding for her work, she said. That's why support from the tournament is so essential.

"To get something funded by the government, you almost have to have done it already. They're risk-averse," she said. "But to push science forward, you need to take risks."

Saturday, Aug. 24, will mark the 25th year of the softball tournament, which began in 1994 with eight teams and last year attracted 64 teams and more than 1,200 players to the St. Christina Fields in Mount Greenwood Park.

The 16-inch softball tournament kicks off early in the morning and runs all day, with a dance party that goes late into the night. A small army of volunteers provides food for all the players and local businesses sponsor the tournament, Rugai said. It can be an intense day for participants: Some are competitive softball players, some are breast cancer survivors, but all have been touched in some way by the disease.

In 1994, when Rugai represented the 19th Ward — and five years after she had been diagnosed with breast cancer at age 44 — one of her staffers, a softball player, floated the idea of putting together a softball tournament to benefit the Y-ME National Breast Cancer Organization. The breast cancer research advocacy organization — of which Rugai served as a board president — closed a number of years ago, but the tournament kept its name.

When Rugai was diagnosed with breast cancer, she said, "women were still whispering about it. They weren't talking aloud or demanding more funding."

This year marks her 30th as a breast cancer survivor. In the quarter-century of the tournament, she estimates they have raised over a million dollars to support breast cancer research.

In 2010, she was inducted into the Chicago 16 Inch Hall of Fame on behalf of the Y-Me Tournament, even though, she readily admits, “I can barely catch or make it to first base.”

For women who have participated in the tournament over the years, it is often the most anticipated event of the year. It is an emotional day of joy mixed with sorrow, players say: a celebration of hope and life; an opportunity to support women with recent diagnoses and those undergoing treatment; a moment to remember friends and relatives who died from the disease.

Deena Traina, 52, a personal trainer, started playing 16-inch softball as a kid growing up in Blue Island. She loved everything about the game, she said: “moving, hitting the ball, sliding, getting dirty.”

She played competitive softball in high school and college and began participating in the Y-Me tournament two decades ago. But when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2005, the tournament took on new meaning for her. Knowing that it was coming up in August kept her spirits up and motivated her to exercise, she said.

“I knew I was going to be OK,” Traina said. “I never worried about dying. I knew I was going to beat it.”

The women she played with, many of whom had survived cancer, supplied her with a wealth of information and a network of support.

“It’s awful to be included in this sorority, but when you have such a loving family, it makes it easier,” she said.

For many women, the most powerful part of the day is the survivors’ game, played around noon with two teams of about 30 players each. At the beginning of the game, Rugai announces each survivor’s name and the length of her survivorship.

“There’s me at 36 years, and people at 20 years, and some at 6 months,” said Mary Beth Lee, 63, the tournament’s longest-surviving player.

Traina said that it can be hard to see someone who has been recently diagnosed: “It takes you right back. I lost my hair, the whole nine yards.”

But for those just starting cancer treatment or in their first months of recovery, seeing women like Traina or Lee can be inspiring.

Katie McAlinden, 40, a teacher at Dawes Elementary School in Chicago, began playing in the Y-Me tournament when she was 25, long before she was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 33, in 2011.

For McAlinden, the full power of the tournament sunk in when she heard her own name called in Rugai’s list of survivors for the first time.

“I just remember being seven months and being so anxious,” McAlinden said. “But as she kept naming women, it was such a spark of hope.”

Now, she still plays on a team called Katie’s Ladies, which includes many of her childhood friends. She also usually serves as the DJ for the post-tournament dance party, which features upbeat music and “a lot of requests,” she said.

Over the past 24 years of the tournament, the players have seen breast cancer treatment options evolve and emphasis on early screening procedures grow. Lee, the 36-year survivor, said that a breast cancer diagnosis used to be “like a death sentence.”

But each year, there is hope to be found on the St. Christina Fields, as women round the bases, share stories of strength, sadness, and survival, and raise money to keep Kay Macleod’s centrifuge spinning.

Macleod also attends the tournament, with fellow researchers and her family. She updates the players on the latest developments in her lab and throws the first pitch of the survivors game.

“It’s quite intense,” she said. “You feel the weight of expectation in terms of what you are doing to find a cure.”