



BRAIN POW

The Brain Trust's Pauletta

THE MAJOR CATALYST

W *With the opening of the Johnnie L. Cochran, Jr. Brain Tumor Center, Dr. Keith Black and his team in the Department of Neurosurgery are seeking to quickly and effectively bring their leading-edge research to patients afflicted with brain cancer. When a promising discovery is made in the laboratory, the Center, says Black, “will streamline the process of early clinical trials and help bridge the gap between research findings and patient care.”*

The two women behind this ground-breaking effort are Pauletta Washington, wife of actor Denzel Washington, and Dale Mason Cochran, widow of the renowned attorney the Center is named after. Catalyst sat down with Pauletta and Dale, two forces of nature who, with The Brain Trust Support Group, are helping to change the shape of brain cancer treatment at Cedars-Sinai.

Catalyst: How long have you two known each other?

Dale Cochran: Do you remember, Pauletta?

Pauletta Washington: You know, it’s strange, but I know you so well now, it almost feels like we’ve always known each other!

How did working together to start the Johnnie L. Cochran, Jr. Brain Tumor Center change your friendship?

DC: It deepened it. I always had a good sense of where Pauletta’s heart was, and this just made her feel like more of a sister to me. It made it more like family than good friends. We’re working toward the same goal and the same cause.

PW: It’s a very passionate goal, so it involves our complete trust in one another. It’s also enabled us to see each other more, so that’s a good thing!

Pauletta, you got involved with Dr. Black’s work first. Do you remember how you met?

PW: Oh yes: That was at one of his “State of the Institute” updates. He was up there speaking, and when he finished I went outside and volunteered right away because it was magnificent. What really got me was that he was getting results. I had participated in many charities where you give money, and you may not see results for a very, very long time. This was at a time in my life when I was impatient. I wanted to see results.

His presentation was phenomenal; his commitment, his dedication, his optimism were amazing. He could have just been so clinical. He was knowledgeable, but he was optimistic too, and it got me excited. One thing led to another, and we went and toured the [Maxine Dunitz Neurosurgical] Institute. After that, I was completely taken.

photo: MarkRobertHalper.com

ER

Washington and Dale Cochran

What about you, Dale?

DC: I met Keith over ten years ago through my husband. I think they had met on an airplane. They knew of each other. They got to talking, struck up a friendship, and realized they had a common passion for sports.

They actually got tickets to a big sporting event, and they each took the boys; little Keith is about 15 now and Jonathan is about 30. They just all got together to go to a game. After that we started seeing each other socially. For a long time, if Johnnie would hear about someone needing a neurosurgeon or neurologist, he was quick to pick up the phone and call Keith.

PW: Even though you and I were brought into this at different times, it was for the same reason. To have you join this project has been a great blessing in many ways. We needed you. I'm a very spiritual person, so I don't believe that anything happens by accident; I think we're all designed for something, and everything happens for a reason. I feel that with you, we will accomplish what we set out to accomplish. I believe that the Center will speak volumes in humanity. And to be a part of this is incredible.

What is so beautiful is the clear vision that Dr. Black and his team have. You can't tell someone who has such a clear vision for a cure that it's not going to happen. You have to believe in it and work as hard as possible with them to make a difference.

—Pauletta Washington

DC: You know, I still don't quite understand why Johnnie was taken away so young, because I know he had so many things to do, still. So, being involved with creating the Center is not just a privilege: It allows me to honor his memory and to make a concrete contribution in Johnnie's name to the field of neuroscience. If we're going to make some sense out of it, let it be something that is going to impact other people. Perhaps save lives; perhaps get a positive message out.

Did you see Dr. Black immediately when your husband's health started to fail?



DC: We were on the East Coast when everything started. We had to consult someone there, but when we realized that it was an issue with his brain, we just flew back here immediately, because he said, "I only want to see Keith Black about it."

PW: I remember reaching out to you and being just struck with no words. You feel stupid; anything you say feels stupid, because nothing you can say is going to fill that void. You were very strong, and one of the most beautiful things about this was your commitment to your husband. You were very selfless. You were completely 150 percent there, and I know that you were suffering, but it seemed like you didn't think about your pain. You did all you could.

What does it mean to you and your family, Dale, to build such a center in Johnnie's name?

DC: We're all so honored to even be a part of it. We're honored that there are some people here—and I think namely Dr. Black and you, Pauletta—who saw a way that they could make a difference through Johnnie's name. It allows his legacy to continue to be honored; we couldn't be more proud of that. We're just incredibly pleased about it. We're pleased beyond words.

PW: You know, it's perfect that this Center bears Johnnie's name because this is what he did: He helped people all the time. There's so much about

him outside of the legal world that I don't think people really know. He gave so much! He loved people; so this is a continuation of what he did during his life.

DC: Exactly. I don't think a day went by that Johnnie wasn't doing something for somebody or something. Here's a guy who loved it when people called for his help, to ask for money, to make a phone call. He was there if you needed him to provide a reference on something; if some student somewhere needed that last semester's tuition to get through college, to get through law school. There are countless stories like that, stories no one ever heard. He just made each person feel special. He had an amazing ability to do that.

PW: I think he's one of our angels: guiding us and helping us define what this Center is going to be. You know, when patients come through those doors, his kind spirit will be there. It's clinical, yes, but at the same time it's warm, encouraging, hopeful.

Why do you think you were able to catalyze so much energy around this project?

PW: Because of Dr. Black, and because of the nature of The Brain Trust. We're a quiet group, which I like, because it's easier to work that way. We really get to get our hands dirty and then come up with some great results. We don't just write the checks.

DC: That's right! We are the nuts and bolts. We meet all the time. We're planning a strategy for the Center, we are trying to figure out how we can interface with other organizations or institutions. Everyone in The Brain Trust is very involved. It's never just one person's effort.

PW: Absolutely. It's not just Dr. Black's effort; it's not just our effort in fund raising; it's a group. It's that old African proverb: It takes a whole village to make a child.

Unfortunately, what makes it easy to talk to people about the Center is that everybody knows someone who is facing or has been affected by brain cancer.

DC: It affects people of all ages, ethnic groups, people of all socio-economic levels. There's nothing that a person can do that can ward it off.

It touches so many lives, and I think the Johnnie L. Cochran, Jr. Brain Tumor Center will bring greater awareness that brain disease is not just some obscure thing out there that happens to just a few individuals. It affects everybody, all of us, and it's not uncommon. It's not an unusual occurrence.

PW: And it is getting worse, actually...

DC: That's right—for children under the age of 19, brain cancer is now the number one cause of cancer deaths. We were shocked when we found out.

PW: What is so beautiful is the clear vision that Dr. Black and his team have. You can't tell someone who has such a clear vision for a cure that it's not going to happen. You have to believe in it and work as hard as possible with them to make a difference.

DC: This Center definitely gives us hope. The clinical trials give everybody hope. After Johnnie was first diagnosed, I learned later that doctors sometimes put a six month life expectancy on someone who is diagnosed with the type of tumor that he had. Well, Dr. Black was able to use the anticancer vaccine his team developed, and Johnnie survived 14 months. That in and of itself was like a miracle. For Johnnie it was 14 months; maybe for the next person it can be three years. ■

