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— BILL AND JANIS WETSMAN

The Philanthropic Spark

Reliable treatment for Crohn’s disease remains hidden deep in our genes and in the complex chemistry of the immune system. A visionary couple’s commitment to funding basic medical research may help find it.

As much as they wish it were not so, Bill and Janis Wetsman understand there is no silver bullet for Crohn’s disease, a devastating ailment that has struck their family. Both Janis and a grown son have endured years of complications from Crohn’s, one of a number of conditions collectively known as inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).

Crucial to finding that silver bullet—or even a more reliable treatment—is answering a fundamental question: Why can most humans coexist with millions of microbes while IBD patients experience debilitating problems as their immune systems try to respond to certain agents?

Answers may lie in basic research, in scientific inquiry that occurs in the less colorful corners of modern medicine, where the pace is normally slow, results are unpredictable, and private funding rare.

But the Wetsmans are no ordinary philanthropists. Well-acquainted with the challenges facing IBD researchers, they embarked on a determined quest. “For seven or eight years, we scoured the country for a program involved in both basic research into the causes of IBD and in translating the findings into improved treatment options,” Bill says. “We reviewed and rejected a dozen options. We did not give up easily.”

The perseverance paid off. In Los Angeles, where they reside part of the year, they met a talented young researcher, David Underhill, PhD, director of Cedars-Sinai’s Graduate Program in Biomedical Sciences and Translational Medicine. Dr. Underhill’s cutting-edge findings in innate immunity—how the body recognizes microbial pathogens and mounts a
defense with inflammation—arose from basic research. And, as it turns out, these findings may lead to new treatments for Crohn’s disease.

“There’s a rapidly growing consensus that an altered innate immune response is at the heart of at least a subset of IBD cases,” says Dr. Underhill. “My team’s research hypothesizes that genetic variants predispose certain families, like the Wetsmans, to Crohn’s disease. If we can identify what those variants are, we may be able to cut off the disease process in younger people, before it can start.”

“There is no other place in the United States where the three elements of basic research, genetics, and clinical trials are as well-developed or as well-integrated as at Cedars-Sinai,” says Stephan R. Targan, MD, director of the Inflammatory Bowel Disease Center and the Division of Gastroenterology at Cedars-Sinai. “With the Wetsmans’ support, Dr. Underhill and his team enjoy an endowment that allows them to explore new ideas—to be independent.”

As the Janis and William Wetsman Family Chair in Inflammatory Bowel Disease, Dr. Underhill is one of more than 50 Cedars-Sinai physicians and scientists who have received this highly coveted professional recognition. For the chairs’ namesakes, it’s an opportunity to align their philanthropic aspirations with those of a scientific leader of the highest caliber. For the chair holder, it ensures perpetual funding for promising lines of scientific inquiry. “The Wetsmans’ chair gives us a license to be creative,” explains Dr. Underhill.

Creativity has long fired the Wetsmans’ spirits. As newlyweds, Bill and Janis toured the top museums of New York, igniting her now decades-long love of fine art and a belief in its power to heal. “I walked into an exhibition of Picasso’s Rose Period at the Museum of Modern Art and walked out a changed person,” she says.

More than changed: inspired, it seems. The effects of that MoMA visit still reverberate in the contributions, both large and small, that Janis and Bill have since made to the art world. Janis, a board member of the Detroit Institute of Arts, spends days each month helping guide the museum through tough times. As the owner of a decorative arts gallery in Birmingham, Michigan, for 14 years, Janis has also introduced artists to collectors and her friends to art.

For his part, Bill, as the owner of a chain of movie houses, has brought first-run movies to generations of Midwesterners.

With her Crohn’s disease in almost complete remission, Janis now hopes her son David, who lives in Connecticut, can soon see the same positive outcome. With new treatment advances on the horizon at Cedars-Sinai and elsewhere, the Wetsmans have rekindled hope. Their hope extends across generations to four grandchildren. Thankfully, none of them show symptoms of Crohn’s disease.

“We want our contribution to play at least a small part in isolating the genes that contribute to this disease,” Janis says. “If we’re lucky, maybe they’ll find a way to turn off the gene in newborns and avoid the damage altogether.” Most of all, Janis and Bill hope their gift will inspire others to also fund the type of basic medical research that leads to treatments and cures.