

TGen Today

NOVEMBER | 2020

A PUBLICATION OF THE TRANSLATIONAL GENOMICS RESEARCH INSTITUTE

A Non-Profit Biomedical Research Institute

A Life of Sharing

Maria Fundora continues her commitment to funding pancreatic cancer research at TGen





MARIA FUNDORA

A LIFE of SHARING

WHEN MARIA FUNDORA SPEAKS ABOUT

supporting pancreatic cancer research and her hopes for improved treatments, you hear the passion in her voice; there's a resonance of belief and commitment to a purpose far beyond the dollars raised.

Her conscription in the fight began in 2008, when Fundora hosted a Mother's Day fundraiser at her restaurant, Casa Nuova, an Italian eatery beloved by the locals of Alpharetta, Georgia.

The event paid tribute to her mother, Iluminada, who Fundora had lost in late 2007 to pancreatic cancer. The inaugural gathering raised \$5,000 and launched what has become an enduring tribute to her mother and a voice for research and clinical trials that are charting a new course for pancreatic cancer patients.

That was the beginning.

And while Casa Nuova had always held weekly fundraisers in support of local schools and various charities, the Mother's Day event would give rise to Purple Pansies, an organization dedicated to

ending pancreatic cancer. In 2019, Fundora (through Purple Pansies) raised \$550,000 for research, the latest success in a life of challenges, perseverance, and charitable giving; a life that began in the Republic of Cuba.

Fundora, born in Havana, emigrated to the US in 1966. Her father had escaped the country four years earlier, having navigated the dangerous waters across the Straits of Florida in a small motorboat. She and her mother left Cuba on March 15 — the Ides of March coincidentally — aboard a Freedom Flight, the government sanctioned twice-daily flights between Cuba and Miami that ran from 1965 to 1973 and reunited nearly 270,000 refugees with their families. Once reunited, the family settled in Chicago.

"I grew up in a home where whatever we had, we shared. Whether it was food, extra clothing, or advice; we met with other refugees in our community and helped," Fundora said. "Those experiences formed the foundation for who I am today."

The family moved to Atlanta in 1984, following her mother's transfer during her time with Lucent Technologies. Her father, a restaurateur, who traveled and consulted with cities and corporations, was fatally stabbed in Santo Domingo in 1987. That same year she met her future husband, Antonio, on a blind date: he, too, a Cuban refugee. They wed two months and sixteen days later. As fate would have it, Antonio was also in the restaurant business, which Fundora recalls warmly with a laugh.

"When I was young I vowed never to marry a Cuban and having grown up in the profession, never work in the restaurant business."

Thirty-five years later, the Fundora's are still fixtures in a business that has shaped their lives and positively changed the lives of others through their charitable work.

When Maria and Antonio started their own family and opened Casa Nuova in 1998, Illuminada joined the team.

"She became kind of famous for her soups", Fundora said — garbanzo bean soup and cream of roasted garlic and red pepper especially."

Everything changed, however, on May 21, 2007; the day Illuminada received her pancreatic cancer diagnosis. She passed away that September.

"To our family, she was the rock of Gibraltar... I could not let go of her loss," Fundora explained. That deep-seated sense of wont ignited in Fundora a desire to once again offer what she could and make a difference. "That's my driving force, to honor my mother."

THE RISE OF PURPLE PANSIES

Following the success of her first event, Fundora heard from a number of patrons who expressed a desire to help further. Together with a friend, she set about developing a name under which to hold future events.

Both women knew that the color purple represented pancreatic cancer research, but it wasn't until her friend phoned one day to inform Fundora that she had a purple pansy growing in her flower garden — while the temperature hovered around 20 degrees — that it all clicked. Fundora

did a bit of quick research and learned that the pansy is known for its resilience and ability to flourish in tough conditions. From that call came Purple Pansies, a nonprofit dedicated to raising awareness and funds for pancreatic cancer research. Today, the charity hosts two yearly events; an open house in July and a gala in September.

In 2011, Fundora connected with TGen through Atlanta businessman and 19-year pancreatic cancer survivor Howard Young, who had turned to TGen's Physician-in-Chief, Daniel Von Hoff, M.D., to spearhead his life-saving treatments.

"TGen and I have a long history, a great history," she said, underscoring how energizing Dr. Von Hoff — a global leader in pancreatic cancer research and treatment — has been to her team.



Young introduced Fundora to TGen Chief Development Officer Erin Massey who shared with her the goals of the Institute and Dr. Von Hoff. Fundora was sold and in TGen she found more than an organization to support, she found a collaborator.

"Maria is most spirited when she is helping others, whether it's a customer in her restaurant, supporting a community project, or raising funds to tackle something as challenging as pancreatic cancer," said Massey. "She is a force for good and we are grateful she believes strongly in TGen. Our lives are enriched for knowing her."

Dr. Von Hoff is equally inspired by Fundora.

"As long ago as I can remember, I bought my mother a pot of pansies each Mother's Day. It was a guarantee for a loving smile back to me. It's amazing to me that many years later I meet Maria Fundora and learn of her efforts to honor her mother," Von Hoff said.

"The Purple Pansies funds enable us to build on our most promising results, whether in the lab or the clinic, and that is why at TGen, we try to honor Maria's efforts by doing our very best to wisely use the funds on the most impactful efforts."

In 2018, Purple Pansies raised \$250,000 solely through grassroots efforts. In 2019 American retail giant, Kroger, signed on as a sponsor. Kroger's Atlanta Division President, Tim Brown, has known Fundora for years and holds the distinction of having attended every Purple Pansies event since its inception. When he was named to head the Atlanta division in 2018, he came to Fundora and said he wanted to make a difference. With the Kroger name behind the event, the 2019 proceeds more than doubled.

You hear passion in her voice, commitment to a purpose far beyond the dollars raised.

"It makes the sleepless nights, the phone calls, the getting into people's personal space all worth it," Fundora said. "It marks your heart."

2020 looked to be a promising year. An anonymous donor had pledged a match of \$600,000 for this year's Purple Pansies Gala event. COVID-19 made reaching the goal a bit more difficult, but in true Maria Fundora fashion (perhaps channeling the inner strength of Illuminada) she didn't give up. The event was a success, raising more than \$1 million, bringing to more than \$2.5 million the total Purple Pansies has raised in support of TGen and Dr. Von Hoff.

In the meantime, Fundora and Casa Nuova continue their legacy of supporting their community by providing meals to healthcare and frontline workers.

"We are so blessed to open our eyes every day," Fundora said. "I'm simply living the lessons I learned as a child by doing what I'm able to keep people's hopes alive."