

Inspired Design

Melissa Breitbart-Sohn Turns a Personal Journey into Research Support

Melissa Breitbart-Sohn was just 31 and the mother of a 3-year-old boy when she felt a lump on the side of her neck in 2005. What was suspected to be a head and neck cancer turned out to be stage III melanoma, which had spread to the lymph nodes in her neck.

“It was a shock that was life-changing,” says Melissa of her diagnosis. “Because there was no conventional therapy, I had tremendous fear about the unknown.”

That fear motivated her to seek treatments at multiple medical centers, including surgery and oral chemotherapy in New York and investigational therapies delivered as far away as Philadelphia. But it also inspired her to create Live4Life, a foundation established to “increase awareness of the disease and inspire those who face its devastation to keep fighting.”

The foundation sponsors efforts to raise funds for melanoma research and to increase awareness of just how deadly this disease can be. The NYU Cancer Institute and The Ronald O. Perleman Department of Dermatology now stand to benefit as well. Live4Life has pledged funds to support a fellowship in translational research related to melanoma.

“I knew I was doing all I could to fight the disease, but I also knew that if it ever came back, I could die,” Melissa recalls. “So I created Live4Life to help the people who might be diagnosed with melanoma after me.”

The Manhattan-based law-school-graduate-turned-designer had a successful line of jewelry creations sold in department stores and online through her



Melissa Breitbart-Sohn, shown with her son, Jackson, started Live4Life to raise awareness of and fund research for melanoma.

company, emma&me®. (Emma was her dog when she started the company, and her image is a fixture on the company Web site.) Melissa has a history of setting aside her time and a portion of her jewelry profits to support charities for cancer, battered women, and AIDS awareness. This time she decided to add “gifts that give back” to the collection and produce inspiring jewelry pieces that celebrate life and love, and to designate all the profits from the sale of those products to go toward Live4Life.

“I wanted to create something I was proud of and that would inspire other women and men to fight,” Melissa says. In particular, she wants to spread the word



The sale of select pieces of jewelry available on www.emmaandme.com supports Live4Life.

about the need for sun protection, which she believes should start when children are young. “I want to tell kids it’s just as easy to put on sunblock each day as it is to get dressed in the morning.”

Live4Life hosts dinners, auctions, tennis outings, and other fundraising events that have raised more than \$1 million to date. To decide where to channel the funds, Live4Life has consulted with the advisory boards of groups such as the Melanoma Research Foundation to identify especially worthy research projects to support.

Melissa became a patient of David Polsky, MD, PhD, Associate Professor of Dermatology and Pathology at NYU Langone Medical Center, after she completed treatment so he could continue to monitor her. She became impressed with the melanoma research program at the NYU Cancer Institute — especially the database of tissue samples that are being studied for clues to the disease’s origins and behavior and the desire to translate those findings to the clinic, where they can help patients. Live4Life is developing ways to work with the NYUCI to promote melanoma awareness and support for patients.

In May 2010, Melissa received news that made her breathe a little easier: She was officially cancer-free five years after her initial diagnosis. “I had a new lease on life,” she recalls. Today she seeks to educate people about the seriousness of melanoma

without paralyzing them with fear. “For a time, I was so scared that I was going to die that I was scared to live,” Melissa concludes. “Today I let people know that together we can fight anything, and that there is hope and help.” ■

For more information about the Live4Life Foundation, visit www.live4life.org. To purchase jewelry to benefit melanoma research, visit www.emmaandme.com.