

ALABAMA'S ONLY NCI-DESIGNATED COMPREHENSIVE CANCER CENTER [WINTER 2025]

O'NEAL COMPREHENSIVE CANCER CENTER



**RISE
TO THE
CAUSE**

UAB THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM

DIANE'S GOT HER
WHOLE LIFE AHEAD OF
HER AND OUR ENTIRE
BREAST CANCER
TEAM BEHIND HER.

O'NEAL COMPREHENSIVE
CANCER CENTER



PART OF THE University of Alabama System

At the O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center,
we work to get you the right care, right away.

ONLY

NCI-DESIGNATED COMPREHENSIVE
CANCER CENTER IN ALABAMA

400+

CANCER PHYSICIANS
AND RESEARCHERS

200

INNOVATIVE
THERAPIES

1

CHOICE FOR
CANCER CARE

onealcanceruab.org

UAB MEDICINE
The University of Alabama at Birmingham

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O'NEAL COMPREHENSIVE CANCER CENTER MAGAZINE

Graphic Designer Teresa Cole

ON THE COVER:

Left to right: Barry Sleckman, Brooks Bennett, Maddie Hendon, Ann Harper Adams, Manning Roberts, Victor Altamirano, Grant Richards, Bailey O'Neill, Georgia Hunter, Livy Duffey, and Graham Gwaltney

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UAB O'NEAL COMPREHENSIVE CANCER CENTER 2024 IRON STRONG AWARDS

BY MACKENZIE SEXTON

The morning of July 12, 2024, the UAB O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center hosted the second annual Iron Strong Awards, celebrating nine clinical trial patients for their courage in battling cancer. The ceremony, held in the Wallace Tumor Institute, featured heartfelt testimonials from physicians, who recognized each honoree's journey by presenting them with iron medals symbolizing each patient's resilience. The event emphasized the critical role of clinical trials in advancing cancer treatments, with impactful remarks from the center's director, Barry Sleckman, M.D., Ph.D., and Susan Stewart, a cancer survivor and 2023 Iron Strong honoree.

THE HONOREES OF THE 2024 IRON STRONG AWARDS INCLUDED:

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Tom Michaels
Patient of Luciano Costa, M.D.
Multiple Myeloma</p> | <p>Rebekah "Becki" Quinn
Patient of Maya Khalil, M.D.
Melanoma</p> | <p>Lisa Williams
Patient of Nusrat Jahan, M.D.
Breast Cancer</p> |
| <p>Hunter Creamer
Patient of Kimberly Whelan, M.D., MSPH
Neuroblastoma</p> | <p>Debby Davis
Patient of Michael Straughn, Jr., M.D.
Ovarian Cancer</p> | <p>Fred Halstead
Patient of Arnab Basu, MPH, FACP, M.D.
Bladder Cancer</p> |
| <p>Dorothy Brown
Patient of Luciano Costa, M.D.
Multiple Myeloma</p> | <p>Tara Ransom
Patient of Katia Khoury, M.D.
Breast Cancer</p> | <p>Iyanla Chaney
Patient of Aman Wadhwa, M.D., MSPH
Hodgkin's Lymphoma</p> |

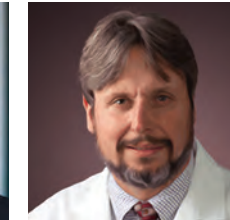
O'Neal Invests Cancer-Related Research Grants Announced Fall 2024



Randall Davis, M.D.



Han-Fei Ding, M.D., Ph.D.



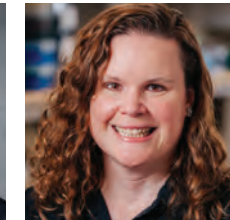
Steven Duncan, M.D.



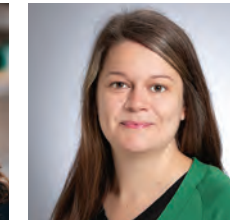
Adam Wende, Ph.D.



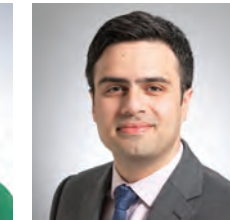
Andrea Gillis, M.D.



Anita Hjelmeland, Ph.D.



Outi Keinaenen, Ph.D.



Syed Mohammad Qasim Hussaini, M.D.

The UAB O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center is pleased to announce its latest O'Neal Invests grant awards. O'Neal Invests funds UAB investigators initiating new cancer-related projects to do key preliminary work enabling competitive extramural applications.

The awardees receiving funding through O'Neal Invests include:

Randall Davis, M.D.
Department of Medicine
Division of Hematology & Oncology
Pre-R01
Modeling FCRL6 Effector Lymphocyte Function in Tumor Immunity

Han-Fei Ding, M.D., Ph.D.
Department of Pathology
Division of Molecular and Cellular Pathology
Pre-R01
Mapping the Metabolic Landscape of Non-MYC^N High-Risk Neuroblastoma

Steven Duncan, M.D., and Adam Wende, Ph.D.
Department of Medicine and Department of Pathology
Division of Pulmonary/Allergy/Critical Care and Division of Molecular and Cellular Pathology
Pre-R01
Lung Cancer, Copper, and T-cell Dysfunction

Andrea Gillis, M.D.
Department of Surgery
Division of Breast and Endocrine Surgery
Catalyst
Defining the Impact of Prescription Amphetamine Use on Solid Cancer Outcomes

Anita Hjelmeland, Ph.D.
Department of Cell, Developmental and Integrative Biology
Pre-R01
GLUT3 Phosphorylation Increases Invasion Independent of Glucose Uptake

Outi Keinaenen, Ph.D.
Department of Chemistry
Catalyst
Host-Guest Click Chemistry for Pre-targeted PET Imaging and Radioimmunotherapy

Syed Mohammad Qasim Hussaini, M.D.
Department of Medicine
Division of Hematology and Oncology
Pre-R01
LEGAL-CARE: A Pilot Feasibility Randomized Trial of a Legal Navigation Program

The O'Neal Invests program at the O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center seeks to promote excellence in the areas of basic, population and translational science research relevant to cancer. The program

supports nascent, paradigm-shifting cancer research proposed by UAB faculty. These are novel ideas with considerable promise and potential impact in the field of cancer care; they are likely to lead to extramural funding, as determined by a peer-reviewed panel of experts.

The O'Neal Invests program distributes funds from individual gifts made by generous donors, as well as a variety of other funding sources including:

- Advisory Board of the O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center funded through ArtBLINK
- Breast Cancer Research Foundation of Alabama
- Mike Slive Foundation for Prostate Cancer Research
- O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center NCTN-LAPS Program
- Richard A. Elkus, M.D., Pilot Grant Program in Pancreatic Cancer Research
- Young Supporters Board of the O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center funded through Palate & Palette

WHAT IS A CANCER RESEARCH INVESTIGATOR?

A research investigator is a person who is involved in running a clinical trial or research study. The investigator may help prepare and carry out the plan for the study, monitor the safety of the study, collect and analyze data and report the study's results. Investigators can include doctors, scientists, nurses and other research staff. Usually, one of the investigators is the principal investigator who is in charge of the whole study, but some clinical trials or research studies may have more than one investigator.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH ENGAGES RURAL BREAST CANCER SURVIVORS IN BLACK BELT



Kimberly Parker, Sumter Co Coordinator in Community Garden



Dallas Co. Group

The O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center’s Office of Community Outreach and Engagement (COE) recently hosted a windshield tour of several rural underserved communities in the Alabama Black Belt as part of an 18-month program called A Family Affair, which supports rural African American breast cancer survivors and their female family members.

The windshield tour — a drive-through visual survey of a community or communities where teams literally drive around and observe so health professionals can see the environments of their patient population — highlighted the lived experiences of rural breast cancer survivors, including their distance from health care and resources. COE received funding from Gilead for this program, and this is the first windshield tour for this study.

The tour was organized to coincide with a visit from program officer Shannon Weber, MSW, who serves as associate director for Gilead’s Public Affairs for Global Oncology Corporate Giving. Claudia Hardy, MPA, director for COE’s Community Health Access and Relations and project director for A Family Affair led the day-long tour from Birmingham through parts of the Black Belt and back. Other COE staff – including Silvia Gisiger Camata, prevention and care manager; Tara Bowman, program manager for the Community Health Advisors (CHA) program; and Kim Hannon, program coordinator for A Family Affair – were also in attendance.

The visit included a tour of the Edmundite Mission Center in Selma, Alabama, where COE Dallas County Coordinator, Dale Bell, provided

a tour of the facilities and a description of the programs they offer. CHA Anna Jones and two Dallas County survivors enrolled in the program met the group. While in Selma, the group visited historic Edmund Pettus Bridge, the Dallas County Health Department and Vaughn Regional Medical Center.

The tour continued through Perry County to Greensboro, where Hale and Green County Coordinator Ada Webb introduced the team to breast cancer survivors enrolled in the program. Carolyn Duncan, Marengo County coordinator, and Barbara Patrick, Hale County CHA, joined the team for lunch at the Stables.

From Greensboro, the team traveled through Marengo and Greene counties to Livingston, where Sumter County Coordinator Kimberly Parker-Coleman provided a tour of the Rush Clinic, Sumter County Health Department and the Bell Brown Career Center highlighting a community garden that provides healthy vegetables and exercise for members of the community.

The tour concluded with a return to Birmingham and a follow-up meeting with COE Community Advisory Board Chair Lauren Roberts, executive director of FORGE Breast Cancer Survivor Center, and Francine Walton, then COE Director of Outreach and Education. Weber was very complimentary of the COE team, community partners and state.

“Thank you for your generous hospitality hosting me in Alabama for an incredible windshield tour,” she says. “I am grateful to you and inspired by your work. It is so clear the devotion you have to the people you are serving and that your intentions and connections with one another are what make the work possible.”

A Family Affair will offer navigation, screening and psychosocial supportive toolkits for survivors. This program is made possible through funding by Gilead.



Claudia Hardy (sitting), Marcus Glover with Judith Hardy and Calandra Brown

The windshield tour — a drive-through visual survey of a community or communities where teams literally drive around and observe so health professionals can see the environments of their patient population — highlighted the lived experiences of rural breast cancer survivors, including their distance from health care and resources. COE recently received funding from Gilead for this program, and this is the first windshield tour for this study.



RISE TO THE CAUSE

Over \$1M Raised for Cancer Patients

Vestavia Hills High School's **RISE Program** is a powerful testament to what determination, compassion and community can achieve in the fight against cancer, having donated **\$1,272,130** to the UAB O'Neal Comprehensive Center since 2019.

A RISE to the Occasion

VESTAVIA HILLS HIGH SCHOOL: A TRADITION OF EXCELLENCE

Located just eight miles from the UAB campus, Vestavia Hills High School is well-known for its academic achievements and dynamic student body, but beyond its classrooms, the school stands out for fostering a culture of service, with the RISE Program at the forefront of its service learning projects.

WHAT IS THE RISE PROGRAM?

RISE — Rebels Impact through Service and Engagement — empowers students to transform their passion for helping others to action. The program epitomizes the school's commitment to creating meaningful change, encouraging its students to lead fundraising efforts that make a tangible impact on their community and beyond.

Students at Vestavia Hills High School have seen the effects of cancer on their parents, grandparents and even their classmates and teachers. The RISE Program's annual fundraising campaigns are a highlight of the school year, featuring a mix of creative, student-led

Front Row (L to R)
 Maddie Hendon, RISE Team Development
 Graham Gwaltney, Youth Leadership President
 Livy Duffey, RISE Community Outreach & Sponsorship
 Back Row (L to R)
 Grant Richards, RISE Chair
 Manning Roberts, RISE Chair
 Ann Harper Adams, RISE Chair
 Victor Altamirano, RISE Chair

Every dollar raised by the **RISE Program** directly supports the groundbreaking work at the **UAB O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center**. From funding new research to enhancing patient care, these contributions are a lifeline for many.

events from familiar fare like charity runs to bake sales to more innovative fundraising efforts, such as one student who volunteered to shave his head for donations to cancer research and subsequently raised over a thousand dollars. Each initiative reflects the ingenuity and dedication of the students who work tirelessly to make every effort count.

A Cause with a Purpose

THE UAB O'NEAL COMPREHENSIVE CANCER CENTER
The O'Neal Cancer Center is a leader in national cancer research and treatment, offering cutting-edge therapies and compassionate patient care. According to the National Cancer Institute, about 70,000 adolescents and young adults ages 15-39 are diagnosed with cancer each year. With that population come specific, specialized care needs that can be overlooked during cancer treatment.



“Cancer treatment, particularly chemotherapy and radiation, can affect a young cancer survivor’s ability to have children,” says Julie Wolfson, M.D., M.S.H.S., in the UAB Institute for Cancer Outcomes and Survivorship and director of the UAB-COA Adolescent and Young Adult (AYA) Oncology Program. “Fertility is a very important issue to cancer survivors, but any interventions to preserve fertility for patients must happen before treatment starts.

“We have more cancer survivors living now than ever before, and with that, we want these survivors to be able to live the lives they want after cancer treatment,” Wolfson says. “Creating this program gives us the opportunity to reach across UAB and Children’s of Alabama to offer more possibilities and options to AYA cancer patients.” The O’Neal Cancer Center’s mission aligns perfectly with the values of the RISE Program, where students seek to make a lasting impact on their community both now and in the future, with a shared goal: advancing cancer research and improving patient care.

Wolfson said the program will reach about 425 patients each year at UAB and Children’s. She said the program leaders will be leading oncofertility research here locally, and by joining research consortia can collaborate with other doctors and scientists across the country to advance research in oncofertility in AYA patients and help establish standards of care.

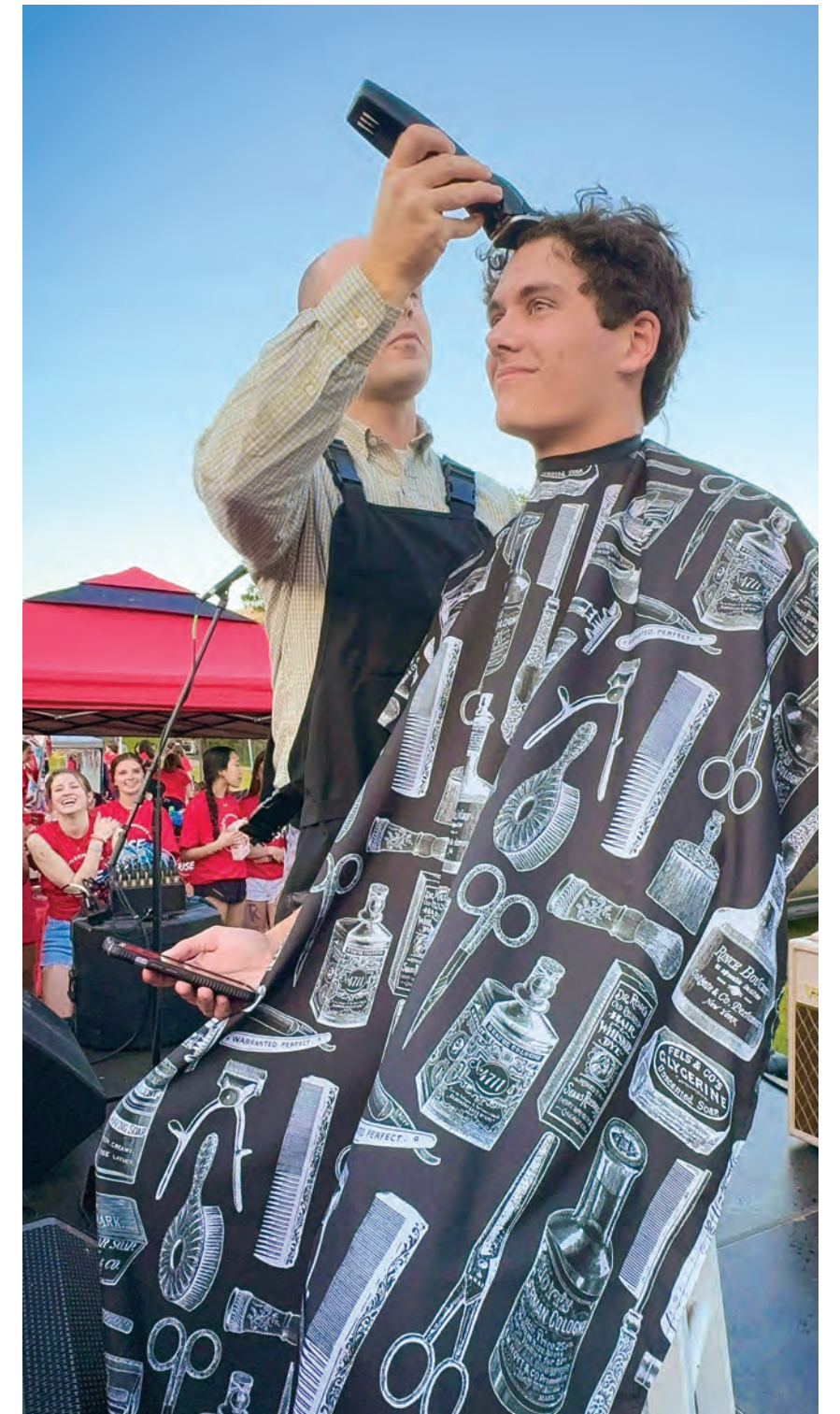
Real Impact, Real Hope

CONTRIBUTIONS THAT CHANGE LIVES

Every dollar raised by the RISE Program directly supports the groundbreaking work at the UAB O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center. From funding new research to enhancing patient care, these contributions are a lifeline for many.

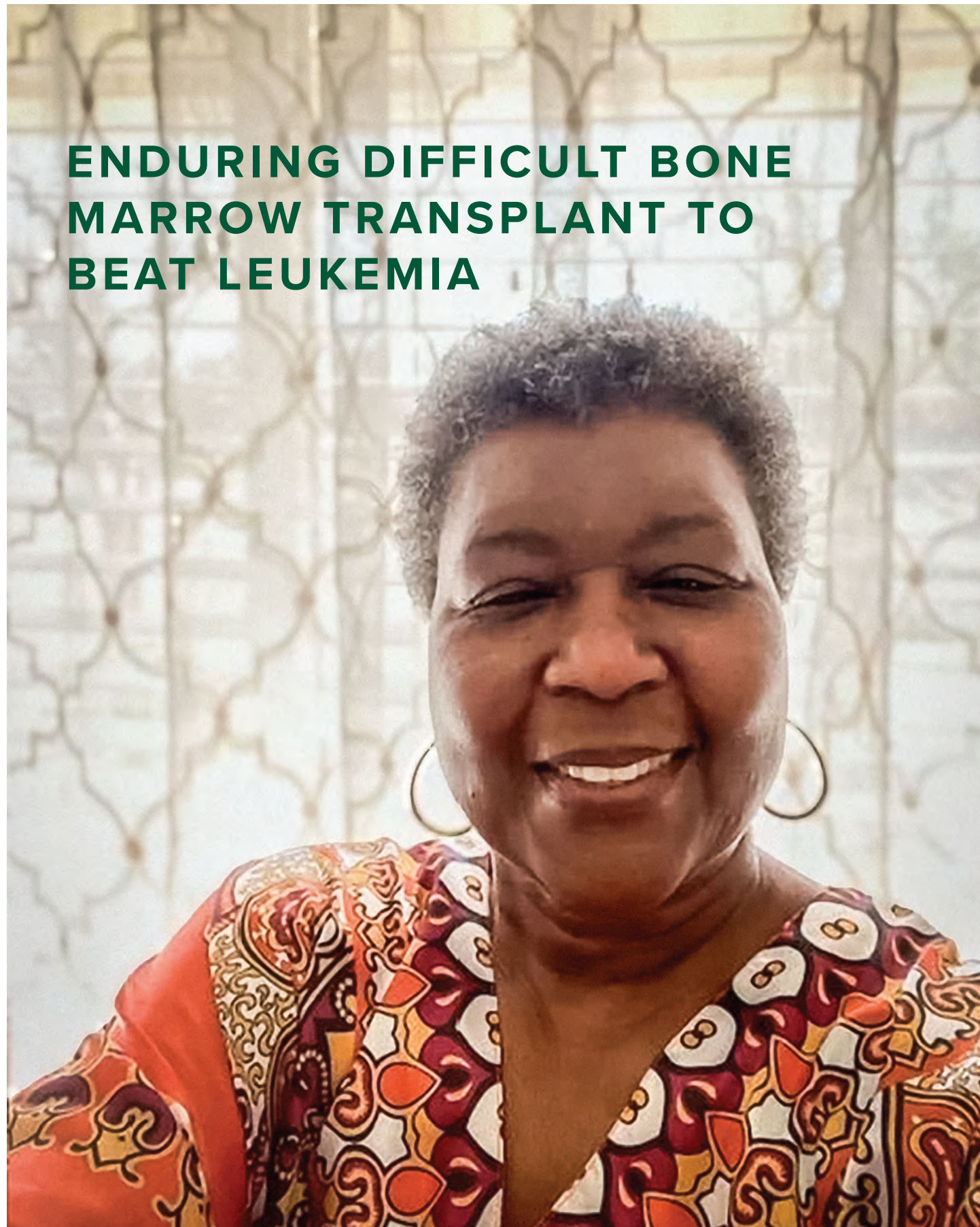
“Our Adolescent and Young Adult Program wouldn’t exist without the students of RISE. All of the research that we do in the AYA program is because of them,” Wolfson says.

The impact of RISE’s efforts is felt far beyond its fundraising milestones. Cancer survivors, families, and caregivers share stories of hope and gratitude, illustrating the life-changing work made possible by the efforts of the Vestavia Hills High School RISE Program. ■■



Victor Altamirano

ENDURING DIFFICULT BONE MARROW TRANSPLANT TO BEAT LEUKEMIA



In early 2018, Tuscaloosa resident Brenda Peoples was enjoying the slower pace of retirement and falling in love with her future husband, Lovie. Age 64 at the time, she received a shocking diagnosis: leukemia. Now six years later, she credits her new lease on life to a bone marrow transplant at UAB Medicine, along with her positive attitude and support from her family and health care team.

Peoples had complained of chronic fatigue to her primary care doctor, and blood tests revealed a low white blood cell count. She was referred to a hematologist (a specialist in blood disorders), and follow-up testing revealed acute myeloid leukemia, a type of cancer that starts in the blood and bone marrow. This often-deadly disease causes the bone marrow to produce an excessive number of immature white blood cells, which in turn crowd out healthy blood cells. Common symptoms include aching bones and joints fatigue, infection and weakness.

Peoples had never been in the hospital before, except to deliver her children, and she was generally healthy. “I had slightly high blood pressure, which I was controlling, but that’s it,” she said. “When my doctor said she needed to refer me to a hematologist, that was the first time it crossed my mind to be concerned about something serious.”

Untreated acute myeloid leukemia (AML) can cause death within six months or less, so Peoples was immediately referred to the UAB O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center, where she met her primary oncologist Luciano Costa, M.D.

“I was admitted that very same day, having been informed to be prepared for 30 days in the hospital,” she said. “When I got there, I was still in utter shock, but they explained the whole plan in the days while I was getting ready for chemotherapy.”

BONE MARROW TRANSPLANT

Two rounds of chemotherapy were needed to kill the cancer cells, but there was a high risk of the AML coming back. A bone marrow transplant (BMT) offered the best chance for remaining cancer-free in the long term and avoiding more chemotherapy in the future. A BMT involves replacing the stem cells in the patient’s bone marrow with healthy bone marrow stem cells from a donor, and chemotherapy and radiation are given prior to the procedure.

The transplant requires a month long stay in the BMT Unit, followed by 100 days of around-



Luciano Costa, M.D.

Today, Peoples remains cancer-free, and Costa tells her that she should be UAB’s “poster child” for how to approach a BMT journey, given how she responded to the many challenges and setbacks.

the-clock caregiver support at home. Patients must be willing and able to endure the long and difficult process.

“The doctors made it clear that a BMT is just the beginning of new lifestyle that you have to work to get through,” Peoples said. “But I was just thinking, ‘Let’s do everything we can, and take advantage of the latest treatments and care to keep me cancer-free.’ Hearing that I was a candidate for a BMT felt like a blessing to me.”

Her family and husband played a major role, as they would be responsible for her at-home care. Also, Peoples was told that her daughter would be the best possible match for donating bone marrow stem cells. “There was no hesitation from my daughter to be my donor, and her constant support has been a blessing,” Peoples said.

SUPPORTIVE CARE AND RECOVERY COMPLICATIONS

Just days after a successful transplant, nurses on the BMT Unit helped Peoples celebrate her birthday with a cake. “The nurses were like mother hens,” she said. “They have a special sense of when you might need your favorite cranberry juice, something to make you comfortable in your bed, pain relief, you name it.”

To make her stay more pleasant, Peoples took advantage of the many supportive care services available at UAB Medicine and the O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center. She enjoyed bedside performances from the Music Therapy team, and a dietitian helped her find the most agreeable and healthy food combinations. Her care team even staged a celebration of love

between her and her fiancé, which lifted their spirits until they could get married. Once she was cleared to go home, UAB Arts in Medicine had a crafting kit ready for her. “They really treat the whole person here,” she said.

Once she returned home to recover from her BMT, Peoples struggled with low energy and other side effects. She needed help from her caregivers in managing her many medications, following a special diet, disinfecting her home to avoid infection, and making weekly trips to UAB. After about 50 days, she developed a magnesium deficiency that required infusions. At one point, a fever required her to stay overnight in the UAB BMT Unit.

“The transplant – getting the stem cells – really just kicks off the BMT process,” Peoples said. “When I got home, the symptoms really hit.”

To make matters worse, Peoples also developed graft vs. host disease, which causes the transplanted cells to attack the body. Short-term symptoms can include mouth sores, skin rashes, abdominal pain, and muscle weakness; it also can lead to long-term complications and even transplant failure. This required even more strict hygiene at home, along with immunosuppressive medications and oral steroids.

Despite these challenges, Peoples followed her doctors’ instructions to the letter. “No matter what they told me to do, I did it, and I never complained,” she said. “My attitude was that I am part of my care team, so I’ll do my best like everyone else.”

BETTER TIMES AHEAD

After about three months, her condition improved, and she faced fewer complications. She was able to help her husband with small things around the house, and her sister and daughter no longer needed to stay overnight. Her weekly visits to UAB were gradually reduced to once a year, and she lost the weight she’d gained due to taking prednisone, a steroid.

What advice does Peoples offer to other patients in her shoes? “One, you are getting personalized care at UAB, and you need to do your part to receive it,” she said. “Two, your family support needs to be in place before even considering a bone marrow transplant, because you can’t do it alone. And three, transplant recovery is a challenging new lifestyle that will test your inner strength and faith, but there are better times ahead.”

WORKING TOWARDS ONE GOAL:
LIFE WITHOUT CANCER



COMPREHENSIVE CANCER CENT

O'NEAL COMPREHENSIVE
CANCER CENTER
UAB THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM

LEADING THE WAY: UAB'S PLANS TO EXPAND CLINICAL TRIALS TO EVEN MORE ALABAMIANS



Over the past decade, the UAB has become a national leader in clinical trials — studies examining the use of new treatments in people. Every drug, device and other therapy that reaches patients in the United States must go through multiple clinical trials, and more patients than ever in Alabama have access to life-changing therapies at UAB. In fact, according to data available from the National Science Foundation, UAB ranks fifth among public universities and 14th overall nationwide in clinical trials expenditures. In 2023 alone, there were 1,469 active clinical trials at UAB. UAB's position has a tangible effect on

everyone in the state. During the COVID pandemic, Alabamians were some of the first Americans to receive access to remdesivir and other cutting-edge treatments. The same is true for revolutionary therapies for conditions including cancer, diabetes, obesity and sickle cell disease. Clinical trials at UAB were instrumental in the FDA approval of therapies including GLP-1 inhibitors (such as Ozempic) for obesity and diabetes, immunotherapies for cancer and a potentially curative gene therapy for sickle cell. "Clinical trials are really what differentiate us," said Anupam Agarwal, M.D., dean of

the UAB Marnix E. Heersink School of Medicine. "Enrolling patients in clinical trials advances the standard of care for almost every disease." This does not mean patients in a clinical trial must miss out on the current standard of care in order to receive a cutting-edge treatment. Patients participating in a clinical trial often receive the best available existing treatments while also receiving new, experimental treatments. "Today many patients on clinical trials are experiencing remarkable, disease-altering effects on cancers that were uniformly lethal just yesterday," said Barry Sleckman,

"Today many patients on clinical trials are experiencing remarkable, disease-altering effects on cancers that were uniformly lethal just yesterday," said Barry Sleckman, M.D., Ph.D., director of the UAB O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center."

M.D., Ph.D., director of the UAB O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center. The university's next step is to reach even more Alabamians with the benefits of clinical trials — not just in Birmingham but in cities around the state. This is more important than ever as trials of new precision medicines bring better, more targeted treatments to patients. Because of UAB's position in clinical trials, Alabamians will be some of the first in the country with access to these treatments — and even more Alabamians will have the chance to take part soon, says Christopher Brown, Ph.D., UAB vice president for Research. "A large part of our focus is on increasing access and personalizing the opportunities," Brown said. "We want to get more people involved across the state so [that] we are serving our citizens better." UAB's impact on Alabama through clinical trials is already significant. According to a report from Southern Research, a UAB affiliate, Alabama ranks 16th among U.S. states in clinical trials per capita, with 67 percent of the state's clinical trials conducted in Birmingham. One of the five goals of the UAB Research Strategic Initiative: Growth with Purpose is to expand clinical research across Alabama, including in cancer, neurology and cardiology.

Patients benefit from clinical trials because they can often receive comprehensive health care at low-cost. Providers receive funding via patient recruitment fees and site operations costs, researchers advance scientific knowledge and health care delivery, and state and regional governments see increased economic growth in a high-skill industry with ladder career opportunities. In addition to the impact on health, clinical trials generate a significant economic benefit within Alabama as well, according to

the Southern Research report. They create thousands of jobs in the state and hundreds of millions of dollars in economic impact, primarily in the Greater Birmingham area. "The purposeful focus on clinical trials — among other key opportunities — in UAB's Research Strategic Initiative, will result in lifesaving, life-changing advancements," said UAB president Ray L. Watts. "We could not accomplish this without the talented, dedicated UAB faculty and staff and our patients who participate in clinical trials."



Lauren Ingram, Laura Kelley, Chase Love, Barry Sleckman, Kathleen Stone, Hollis Gifford

OAK MOUNTAIN COLOR RUN DONATIONS

Every year, students from Oak Mountain High School host the Oak Mountain Color Run, which helps raise funds for clinical trials research at the O'Neal Cancer Center. This year, they raised \$23,068, which the students presented to O'Neal Cancer Center director Barry Sleckman, M.D., Ph.D.

THE MAGIC OF GIVING: HOMEWOOD WITCHES RIDE 2024



Janie Mayer, Chris and Crisi Reebals, Brett Cole, Ryanne Player, Barry Sleckman



Every fall, the streets of Homewood, Alabama come alive with a scene straight out of a fairytale. Witches on bicycles, golf carts and even an antique firetruck, cast their spell of joy and generosity during the annual Homewood Witches Ride.

October 2024 marked the 12th annual Homewood Witches Ride. Each year, Ryanne Player, Brett Cole and Jamie Mayer spend upwards of six months planning the Homewood Witches Ride.

"It brings me joy. I love it growing. The witches that come are who have made it what it is; they have transformed it," Mayer says. The ride has grown to hundreds of participants raising thousands for the UAB O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center, including over \$60,000 during the 2024 ride. The money raised from the event helps fund clinical trials at UAB, which help push forward research and understanding of the most challenging cancers.



BRUSHSTROKES TO BEAT CANCER:

The 2024 ArtBLINK Gala Reaches Major Fundraising Milestone



Foots and Allene Parnell, Hugh, Carleton, Allene and Anderson Neighbors.

Once a year, when Gabrielle Rocque, M.D., an associate professor in the Division of Hematology and Oncology, enters the Kirklin Clinic on the night of the annual ArtBLINK gala, she sees the space where she normally cares for breast-cancer patients reimagined as the site of a lively, black-tie celebration. “It blows me away,” she says. “It’s completely transformed.”

While ArtBLINK has been a successful fundraiser for the O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center for decades, in 2024 it reached a new milestone: for the first time, the event raised more than \$1 million. ArtBLINK has become one of the city’s most iconic events, bringing people

together to toast the O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center and its more than half century of world-class cancer care, research and innovation. Along with its unique hosting site — the workspace on a normal day for hundreds of physicians in nearly three dozen specialties — the Gala stands out for many reasons. As guests enjoy dinner, cocktails, live music and dancing, local artists are on hand to create one-of-a-kind works of art which guests begin bidding on before the pieces are completed. The enthusiasm surrounding ArtBLINK is emblematic of what the O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center means to the people of Alabama and beyond.

“The O’Neal Cancer Center provides our community with access to the best, most cutting-edge care,” said Laura McDonald, president of the O’Neal Cancer Center Advisory Board for 2023-2024. The Advisory Board raises money, promotes awareness and provides support in other important ways. McDonald’s own passion for the cause stems from a personal experience with the O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center, when her late mother, Karen York, was treated for ovarian cancer about 30 years ago. “I can’t imagine her having received better treatment anywhere else in Alabama,” she said. “I want the same for everybody across the state.”

The 2024 Gala also included a special tribute to Allene and Foots Parnell, who were recognized as the 2024 Director’s Circle honorees for their commitment to the O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center. Like McDonald, the Parnells also have a personal connection to cancer, having lost their 22-year-old daughter, Carleton, to the disease.

“The Parnells are a great representation of the heart of the advisory board,” McDonald said. “They have spent a good part of their personal lives working to make a difference in cancer-related causes.”

Recognized as among the country’s leading cancer-research institutions, the UAB O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center was one of the first eight facilities in the nation to receive the Comprehensive Cancer Center designation from the National Cancer Institute (NCI). It remains the only such center in Alabama.

Barry Sleckman, M.D., Ph.D., director of the O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center, said money raised by ArtBLINK is earmarked for the Center’s O’Neal Invests grant program. In his

four-year tenure, more than 60 pilot grants have been funded.

“When we solicit funding proposals, we don’t indicate any particular type of work or type of cancer that we want to fund,” Sleckman says. “We simply say, ‘We want really great ideas that are relevant to cancer.’” These range from laboratory research to population research and what Sleckman identified as “translational trials — taking discoveries that are either made here or potentially elsewhere and planning for testing those discoveries in people with cancer.”

Rocque’s work represents the kind of forward-thinking research that benefits from the pilot grant program. In addition to caring for breast-cancer patients in the clinic once a week, she is deeply engaged in research that focuses on a broader picture of cancer care.

“Much of the research I pursue is in communication, patient experience, and quality of life,” Rocque says. This includes shared decision-making, which focuses on including patients’ personal needs and values as part

of the treatment-formation process; patient-reported outcomes, in which information directly reported by patients about their health status is integrated into their care. “We’re just scratching the surface of the power of bringing patient voice more purposefully into cancer care and delivery,” she says.

Rocque calls ArtBLINK her favorite event of the year. “It’s such a great opportunity to celebrate and be thankful,” she said, adding that while she’s never had the winning bid on an artwork produced at the event, she has commissioned pieces from the featured artists afterward. “There’s something valuable and important in my mind about having this event in a place where we care for people, and it’s a great way for the community and providers at UAB to [mingle] and get to know each other a little bit outside of the clinical setting. I don’t know of many other occasions where that happens in such a fun way.”

—ROSALIND FOURNIER



LEFT: Anupam Agarwal, M.D. and Lisa Curtis, Ph.D. ABOVE: Sarah Mason

RIGHT: Lyndell and Lenà McDonald BELOW: Ali and Nelson Bean, Jr. and Kimberly and Nelson Bean Sr. BELOW ROW TWO, LEFT: Vicki Denaburg BELOW ROW TWO, RIGHT: Joe and Dawn Bulgarella, Holly and Richmond Van Winter BOTTOM ROW, LEFT: Katie Bradner, Barry Sleckman, Jessica Tyler, and Beth Davis BOTTOM ROW, RIGHT: Lauren and Jordan DeMoss



SECOND ROW, LEFT: Susan Williams, Shan and Tricia Paden SECOND ROW, RIGHT: Allene and Fouts Parnell, Laura McDonald



TOP PHOTO: Scott and Susan Williams, Tricia and Shan Paden, Virginia and George Jones
SECOND ROW, LEFT: Sloan and Chappell Covington, Nicole and Josh Carpenter
SECOND ROW, RIGHT: Davis Livingston, Joan Curtis, Gaines Livingston
BOTTOM RIGHT: Mitzi and Richard Davis, Linda Newell



TOP LEFT: Ann Hayes and Fools Parnell
TOP RIGHT: Sue and Chris Brown, Malcolm Nelson and Cheri Canon
SECOND ROW, LEFT: Dede and David Pittman, Gray and Lee Thuston
SECOND ROW, RIGHT: Veronica Merritt, Adrienne Williams Higgins, Ahmad Austin, Latraunda Smith, Dhana Yarbrough
BOTTOM ROW (L TO R): Shawn Wimbish, Victoria Frazier, Andrea Gillis, Rachael Guenter, Herbert Chen



TOP LEFT: Marsha Morgan, Tamara Johnson, Veronica Merritt TOP RIGHT: Madison Faile SECOND ROW, LEFT: Addison Duke SECOND ROW, RIGHT: Hershell Hamilton, Jillian Hamilton, Neal Hamilton, Kia Hill BOTTOM ROW, LEFT: Matthew and Jen Dent, Beth and Chandler Bailey BOTTOM ROW, RIGHT: Mary Grace Tracy



O'NEAL COMPREHENSIVE
CANCER CENTER

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