

# Pillars of Impact:

## *Stories of Service*

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The Woman's Board of  
RUSH University Medical Center  
**2023 Fall Benefit**

FEATURED STORIES

09

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23

# A Force in Being First

## BONE AND JOINT

### Tackling the Challenges of Cancer

A high school football star from Chicago's South Side, Arthur "Art" Ray Jr. had already signed to play for Michigan State when he was diagnosed with osteosarcoma.

While seeking a second opinion, he found Steven Gitelis, MD, at RUSH.

"Dr. Gitelis told me I'd be able to keep my leg and continue playing football," Ray said.

Over four years, Ray underwent multiple surgeries. Even as he went through lifesaving treatment, he struggled with having to defer his dreams.

"It was a demoralizing time for me," he said.

Despite the difficulties, Ray found healing and hope thanks to his care team at RUSH.

"Dr. G. came to the rescue every time — no matter what the issue was or how challenging," Ray said.



Ray played his first game for Michigan State in March 2011 and graduated in 2012. He went on to play for Fort Lewis in Durango, Colorado and then for the Miami Dolphins.

**"Dr. G came to the rescue every time..."**

Since concluding his career playing football, Ray has coached for the Jacksonville Jaguars and the University of Arkansas and runs a business training local football players.

As for Dr. Gitelis, he has been changing the lives of patients like Ray for more than 50 years.

"When I told Dr. G. I was going to play for the NFL, he said, 'Go, Art, go!' We had been through so much at that point; he knew nothing was going to stop me."

**"The team at RUSH did such an amazing job and saved my mom's life"**

## CANCER

### A Lifesaving Second Opinion

Lynn Stewart was full of life once again and declared cancer-free. But the very treatment that saved her life nearly killed her.

"It was all so sudden," said her son, Bill Stewart. "To see her go — just over a span of a couple weeks — from being healthy and having a really good prognosis to being told she's got maybe weeks to live, it was shocking."

Lynn, 72, who had recently completed chemotherapy treatment for stage 1 breast cancer, began to experience unusual symptoms, including swelling in her legs that prevented her from walking, loss of appetite, and fading in and out of consciousness.

After doctors elsewhere said there was nothing left to do for Lynn, her family sought a second opinion at RUSH University Medical Center, which specializes in not only treating patients' cancer but also addressing other health issues and complications that may arise among survivors.

Cardiologist Tisha Marie Suboc, MD, quickly admitted Lynn and diagnosed her with advanced heart failure. The cardiology care team then launched a treatment plan for Lynn, with all testing and appointments conveniently taking place at RUSH.

Within months, Lynn was able to transition from the hospital to assisted living and then back to her home in Southern Illinois. She is now back to volunteering, country line dancing and enjoying her three young grandchildren.

"It was like a miracle," Bill said. "The team at RUSH did such an amazing job and saved my mom's life. It was such a remarkable transformation. She went from being weeks away from death to doing all the things she loves."



Lynn Stewart, a cancer survivor, is back to doing all the things she loves after a second opinion at RUSH saved her from life-threatening heart failure.

“It’s meant everything to me. It was life-changing. It was a big reason why I’m here.”



#### EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

## Supporting a First-Generation Student’s Dream

With help from The Woman’s Board Endowed Scholarship, Wafaa Tali is on her way to becoming a primary care pediatric nurse practitioner through coursework at the RUSH University College of Nursing.

Through her experiences studying pre-medicine at Boston University and subsequent work experience, Tali was inspired by the professionals she worked alongside and the resiliency, strength and playfulness of her pediatric patients.

She set her sights on obtaining her doctor of nursing practice, or DNP, degree and working with children from systemically marginalized communities to make access to high-quality pediatric care more equitable.

“I love learning about and working with kids,” Tali said. “They keep you on your toes. They are funny and curious. They will say what’s on their mind.”

Tali’s parents, who immigrated to the U.S. from Morocco in the 1980s, encouraged her and her younger brother to prioritize education.

“It’s shaped who I am today,” Tali said of their support. “As a first-generation undergrad student and now a first-generation grad student, it’s been a beautiful experience. It’s very humbling to think about what my life could have been like if I didn’t go to school in the U.S. and have opportunities like going to one of the top DNP programs in the country at RUSH.”

When Tali found out she was the recipient of The Woman’s Board Endowed Scholarship, she was surprised and grateful.

“It’s meant everything to me,” she said. “It was life-changing. It’s a big reason why I’m here, and I don’t know if I’d be here without it.”

#### HEALTH EQUITY

## Helping Pre-Med Students Achieve

Recognizing the importance of having someone to guide you through the process of applying to and attending medical school, sisters Jayline and Brenda Perez helped launch a mentorship program at RUSH University Medical Center. The program — RU Ready MedSchool Boot Camp — prepares students for medical school.

“Mentorship to brown and Black students, first-generation students and students from all walks of life is so important,” Jayline said, “because they deserve to live their dream and have someone to rely on in their pre-med journey.”

A Mexican-American, Jayline aims to be a surgeon and has been involved in the RUSH Education and Career Hub, or REACH, programs since 2017. She has also participated in the MedSTEM Pathways and College Career Pathways programs.

“When I looked for a mentor, I wanted someone who truly took action about inclusiveness and diversity,” she added.

She reached out to 40 doctors and connected with surgical oncologist Rosalinda Alvarado, MD. “Being able to job-shadow a surgical oncologist was special because it truly reminded me of my deceased abuelo, Lupe, who died from cancer and who raised my sisters and me while my parents worked at a factory all day,” she added.



Now, Jayline’s goal is to serve her community — Latinx and African-American people — and encourage others to do the same.

“I have this inner voice telling me, ‘You need to represent brown and Black people, to be a doctor for other people who need access to health care.’”

**“When I looked for a mentor, I wanted someone who truly took action about inclusiveness and diversity.”**

INNOVATION

## Advancing Cancer Care

RUSH Cancer Center researchers are among the first to develop and test treatments that improve the immune system's ability to eliminate cancer.

One is tumor-infiltrating lymphocytes — or TILS — an experimental cell therapy being developed for patients with advanced-stage solid tumors. TILS provides an option when tumors don't respond to standard chemotherapy.

"We retrieve a person's own cancer-fighting white blood cells from the solid tumor," says Sunita Nathan, MD, associate director of the Section of Bone Marrow Transplant and Cellular Therapy, "reengineer and expand these cells in the lab, and then reintroduce them into the body where they find and more precisely attack the tumor cells."

Dr. Nathan has worked in the RUSH oncology department for 15 years, and she sees the opportunity to offer this new immunotherapy as an exciting step forward for patients and RUSH providers.

The RUSH Cancer Center in the Joan and Paul Rubschlager Building will be a launching pad for groundbreaking immunotherapies, and a home to



spaces designed for optimum cancer care, like TIL therapy. The new RUSH Cancer Center will offer cutting-edge research, clinical trials and training.

"TIL therapy is primarily being done in the inpatient setting currently. The new RUSH Cancer Center affords a state-of-the-art space to do a significant portion of this treatment in the outpatient setting," she says.

With the Rubschlager Building, as well as the recruitment of top clinical and research leaders, RUSH has solidified its place at the forefront of transformational developments in cellular therapy and cancer care in the Chicago area and the nation.

**"... reintroduce them into the body where they find and more precisely attack the tumor cells."**



**"The care he received when we switched was night and day — RUSH is like a well-oiled machine."**

NEURO

## Getting Back into the Swing of Things

It was an ordinary day in March when Toni Stark received the call from her husband, Steve: He'd been in a car accident.

Toni rushed to the hospital, where she learned Steve had a concussion and a hearing issue. To confirm there wasn't any further damage, they insisted on an MRI.

The bad news, however, kept coming. Doctors found a sizeable tumor that needed to be surgically removed. After being referred to another hospital, Steve and Toni sought a second opinion from RUSH University Medical Center, following a Woman's Board event Toni attended with her employer, Illinois Tool Works.

"The care he received when we switched was night and day — RUSH is like a well-oiled machine," Toni said.

Richard Byrne, MD, a neurosurgeon at RUSH, put Toni and Steve at ease. He explained that he had operated on more than a thousand brain tumors.

Surgery was scheduled for the following week, and the outcome was a success.

"Dr. Byrne contacted me immediately after surgery and said it did not appear to be a cancerous tumor," Toni said. "Those were the first words he said to me. I was so grateful."

Steve was up and walking that same day and came home two days earlier than expected, where he continued his recovery. Further tests confirmed the tumor was noncancerous, and Steve was cleared to continue with full activity by May.

He was even able to participate in a charity golf outing.

"I didn't play great, but it takes a while," Steve said. "What mattered was that I was finally getting back into the swing of things, thanks to RUSH."



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