

A little girl's spirit lives on through artwork that funds a fight against cancer

'These parents were able to turn grief into hope'

By **Thomas Farragher** Globe Columnist, Updated February 13, 2022, 4:56 p.m.



Eliane Markoff, founder of Art in Giving, posed for a portrait with husband Gary Markoff next to the work of John Himmelfarb, entitled "walking the city". After their daughter passed away from brain cancer in 1992, Markoff founded the organization to help raise funds for childhood cancer research through the sale of fine arts. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

WALTHAM – It's a bright and cheery image: three small flowers in red and blue and yellow, blooming on a small strip of green under the beams of a brilliant watercolor sun.

It is unmistakably the work of a child.

But it has become the symbol of a powerful and hopeful effort, and a mighty medical fight against childhood cancer that has eclipsed the \$2 million mark.

It's the lasting legacy of a 9-year-old girl named Rachel Molly Markoff, who drew the flowers during one of her many visits to the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, and who died 30 years ago from brain cancer.

“It restores my faith in humanity,” said Dr. Edward J. Benz Jr., president and chief executive emeritus of the Dana Farber Cancer Institute.

“This is a family that suffered a terrible tragedy and the loss of a daughter to brain cancer. They've turned their sadness and grief into an effort to make a difference.

“They're investing in a better future for other people who might suffer from brain cancer. That's heartwarming to me.”



Rachel Molly Markoff of Wellesley who died 30 years ago from brain cancer. COURTESY OF FAMILY

It would be heartwarming to anyone to learn about the girl behind the logo and her family, a mom and a dad and a sister who have decided that Rachel's memory will be honored with an effort that could change the lives of other sick children, children just like Rachel, who — with her twin sister, Audrey — was born at Newton-Wellesley Hospital in October 1983 and who would grow into a sweet and sensitive little girl.

The little girl who loved to collect seashells by the ocean. The little girl who would sit quietly while her father played the saxophone. The rule follower who kept her space so neat that she earned a bedroom of her own.

The little girl who one day, inexplicably, lost her balance, triggering emergency trips to the doctor that, ultimately, led to a CT-scan and a life-changing medical bulletin.

“They said it was a brain tumor,” Gary Markoff, her father, told me the other day. “A brain stem glioma. No cure.

“When you have a brain stem glioma, your system starts shutting down. You can’t swallow. You can’t speak. It’s pretty bad. So, we went to Children’s [Hospital] and that first night, the oncologist came up to me and I almost lost it because he said, ‘Do you want us to resuscitate her if she stops breathing?’ ”

It’s hard to imagine a more searing, more difficult question for any parent to grapple with.

That was in January 1992.



Denise Driscoll looked at her work, which is displayed in Cambridge with other works of art curated through Art in Giving, a nonprofit founded by Eliane Markoff. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

What followed were radiation treatments that diminished the tumor, allowing Rachel to go home. There was a family trip to Paris in May that year. She started school again in September. But after three or four weeks, she was at home. There was hospice care there.

She died on Oct. 17, 1992.

“You learn to cope with it,” Gary Markoff, 72, told me. “You learn to deal with it. But you never get over it.”

“The way I see it,” said Eliane Markoff, 67, “I don’t think anyone in this life gets out of this life with no pain. For me, the best thing was to keep busy. To keep her memory alive. But it’s very important to find something to do that makes you feel like it wasn’t just a big, big loss. It was a big, big loss but what can you do to minimize the pain?”

One of the answers to that question lies in the founding of Art in Giving, a nonprofit group started by the Markoffs: an online art gallery that exhibits the works of talented artists and has raised more than \$2 million to pay for basic childhood cancer research.

Here’s how it works: Artists exhibit their work with Art in Giving. Half of the purchase price of the art goes directly to fund work to help identify and cure brain cancers.

It’s money for top researchers at Dana Farber, and Johns Hopkins University, Stanford University Medical School, and other institutions.

“One of the great things about Art in Giving is that the funds they raise and donate to cancer centers for research can be focused on young, rising investigators,” Benz told me. “They are the ones with the freshest ideas that are hard to fund from more traditional forms of funding.”

Dr. Mariella G. Filbin, who joined the faculty at Dana Farber as a pediatric neuro-oncologist in 2017, received a \$250,000 grant from Art in Giving two years ago. She said the money will help move the needle in the fight against cancer.

“My lab focuses on single-cell sequencing,” she said. “We take tumor tissues from patients and take it apart into single cells and sequence every one of them.”

“I’m dedicating my career to this,” Dr. Filbin said. “It’s the most aggressive brain tumor and it affects young children, and teenage children — mostly school-age children between 6 and 9. No matter what we throw at it, it doesn’t care.

“And I want to change that. I want to change the field.”

That is precisely what Gary and Eliane Markoff want, too.

“The best way to find a cure is for the researchers to go out and investigate areas where no one else has investigated before,” Gary Markoff said. “There’s been no progress on brain stem glioma since Rachel died. None. And we said: This is going to change.”

That change will come in the name of a little girl named Rachel Molly Markoff.

She’s the little girl who loved her twin sister, Audrey. The cute daughter who once delighted her father by hiding in his closet while he changed clothes after a day’s work.

She died one week after her ninth birthday.

But her memory is still inspiring masters of medicine to conquer unspeakably cruel diseases.

“These parents were able to turn grief into hope,” Dr. Filbin said. “They were bold enough to say, ‘We’ve got to do something about this. We’re not going to accept the status quo and we’re going to use art to do that.’”

“There is some beauty in that. There are lot of connections between art and science. I’m impressed with what they’re enabling the field to do. They are turning grief and love into something much bigger than themselves.”

All of it in the name of the little girl who painted bright flowers in a field: flowers that blossom still.

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