

COLD SPRING HARBOR

Charities Unite With Lab To Battle Rare Cancer

By Danny Schrafel

dschrafel@longislandergroup.com

Four charities have teamed up with the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory to finance their research in pursuit of new treatments for a rare form of cancer that largely affects children.

Laboratory leaders, joined by representatives of the Michelle Paternoster Foundation for Sarcoma Research, the Christina Renna Foundation, the Clark Gillies Foundation and the Friends of T.J. Foundation, announced the project on the laboratory's campus Oct. 30.

Chris Vakoc, assistant professor at the lab, will lead the project, which aims to discover new drug targets in rhabdomyosarcoma (RMS). Vakoc will also collaborate with Dr. Charles Keller, a physician and professor at Oregon Health and Science University, one of the world's leaders in research of RMS, which involves growths in the cells that typically develop in skeletal muscles.

"This got our attention as a disease area where we wanted to make an impact," Vakoc said.

The project began this spring when the lab hosted a conference on RMS that convened in May.

"We now have a really good program – I think things are going extremely well," said the lab's CEO and president, Bruce Stillman.

The project will require anywhere from \$300,000 to \$400,000 per year when it is fully realized, Stillman said. The initial support from the



Dr. Bruce Stillman, right, speaks to supporters Oct. 30 of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory's Sarcoma Research Project.

four charities, however, will allow the lab to kick-start the program, which will aim to discover identified targets that the lab will be able to begin testing in pre-clinical models in the coming years.

"If that works out, hopefully we can develop drugs" and begin preclinical testing, he said, leveraging knowledge they've gained studying cancers of the breast, prostate and pancreas.

The core four charitable agencies shared common bonds before their current joint effort in

Cold Spring Harbor.

Paternoster said his late wife Michelle met T.J. Arcati while undergoing Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. That led Paul Paternoster to reach out to the Arcati family; with their connections to Stillman, the coalition started to form.

Gillies, a New York Islanders great, said Paternoster, a board member on his charitable foundation, was key in getting him involved in the lab's efforts. His Clark Gillies Foundation, founded in 1998, focuses on aiding causes affecting children ages 5-18. Soon, the Friends of T.J. Foundation, founded in 2009 after Arcati was diagnosed with a sarcoma at age 31, was in the fold. The charity is dedicated to Arcati's memory, who died at age 34.

"This is a little different – rather than helping kids who have diseases," Gillies said. "This is to try and find a cure. This is a great project for us, and we're happy to be part of it."

Renna's father Phil Renna said his daughter was diagnosed with RMS at age 14 and succumbed two years later. He launched the foundation in 2007, which raises funds in support of the research of children's cancers.

"We really didn't want to see other children go through this," he said. "Because it's a very rare cancer, it doesn't get a lot of attention, and funding for it is very difficult."

Joining forces, Renna said, is vital.

"The ability for us to leverage each other and do something together is just incredible," he said.

Long Islander News photo/Danny Schrafel