

Loss of loved ones drives a family's determination to eradicate cancer

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Alison Brown-Carvalho is shown back, two children on side and husband William Brown in front center. Credit: UH Cancer Center

Alison Brown-Carvalho lost her husband William Brown to pancreatic cancer in 2009, after 16 years of marriage. A few years later she lost her mother, Janet (Ikeda) Shitabata, to stomach cancer.

As a result, Brown-Carvalho made a career change and joined the University of Hawai'i Foundation in the Development Office at the University of Hawai'i Cancer Center, determined to do her part to eradicate cancer. She raised \$50,000 from family members and donated it for pancreatic cancer research at the UH Cancer Center.

The donation will pay for a study aimed at detecting pancreatic cancer at earlier stages in order to give people a greater chance of surviving the highly lethal cancer. The gift shows that Hawaii families can make a difference in [cancer research](#).

"I never thought we could fund an entire research project. I was always under the impression that hundreds of thousands of dollars were needed for even the smallest of projects. It is so rewarding to know our family donation for this research could possibly make a huge impact on improving the detection of pancreatic cancer," Brown-Carvalho said.

As part of the donation, a concrete marker with William's and Janet's names has been installed on the grounds of the Cancer Center in Kakaako, commemorating their lives and reminding the world of the emotional costs of cancer. The marker was dedicated on Saturday. Brown-Carvalho has since remarried and attended the ceremony with her family, and the Ikeda and Shitabata families.

"It's a reminder of why we are here every day at the Cancer Center," Brown-Carvalho said.

The research supported by the donation is being conducted by Dr. Wei Jia, PhD, the director of the Cancer Center's Shared Resources Program and an expert in the field of metabolomics, which involves searching through the body's metabolites for signs of disease, including cancer. Jia had done research published in the *Journal of Proteome Research* showing early promising results in detecting pancreatic cancer from a

panel of five metabolites found in the blood plasma. Metabolites are the end products of gene and protein regulations that can be used for disease diagnosis and prediction.

The gift from Brown-Carvalho's family allows Jia to take his research a step further and validate the findings before possibly developing a test from it, so that pancreatic cancer can be detected while it is in earlier stages and still treatable.

"Without the donation we would have to stop and try to get a grant," he said. "The greatest issue for pancreatic cancer is that it has a poor survival rate. Once the person is diagnosed they are usually in the late stage. It is a very aggressive disease, it develops fast. Early detection helps the patient prognosis improve."

The study may show that the five metabolites together do reliably detect [pancreatic cancer](#) earlier. But the study may also show that they do not. Brown-Carvalho understands that not all research will result in a new test or treatment. "Then at least we know what won't work, and why," she said. "It is important to know, in order to advance the research."

Provided by University of Hawaii Cancer Center

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