

Robyn J. Barst: An advocate and a wonder

Dr. Robyn J. Barst was a fighter, but an advocate; she was tenacious, but she was loving; and she was difficult, but she was kind. Robyn Barst was this way in every aspect of her life: As a physician, a clinical researcher, a mother, a wife, a hostess, a diner in a restaurant, an audience member at the opera. It was her insurmountable stamina and her passion for making a difference that made the world she left a better place to live, not only for her patients, friends, and family, but also for the generations of pulmonary hypertension (PH) patients and research to come.

"I could never resolve how or why she was so driven," said Dr. Samuel Barst, Robyn's husband of 32 years and Section Chief of Pediatric Anesthesia at Westchester Medical Center in Valhalla, New York. "We would travel a lot, you know, and the whole time she would review manuscripts, going and coming across the Atlantic...her energy level was just boundless. But today PH is a disease that can be medically managed with many of the therapeutic modalities Robyn was instrumental in helping bring to clinical fruition."

Robyn graduated from the University of North Carolina Medical School in 1979 and in 1983 finished her fellowship in cardiology at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York. In the 1980s, there were only a handful of doctors across the world interested in PH, let alone pediatric PH, and Robyn was one among them. At the time, there was no known treatment for the too often fatal disease. Robyn decided she wanted to do something about this and soon established herself as an internationally-acclaimed expert in the field.

"Robyn was clearly a champion of the pediatric patient," said Dr. Stuart Rich, Professor of Medicine at The University of Chicago and long-time friend and colleague to Robyn.

Though a pediatric cardiologist, in 1995 Robyn Barst served alongside Stuart Rich on the steering committee for the first clinical trial which tested the effects of the drug epoprostenol (Flolan®) on adult patients with PH. Up until this time, there was no approved drug for the treatment of PH. As a result of this trial, the drug was approved for use on adult patients.

"She then would fight on behalf of her pediatric patients because these drugs never had approval for children," Dr. Rich said. "Robyn would show videos of infants and toddlers with the backpack and pump running around and playing like normal children...She wouldn't take no for an answer."



Dr. Robyn J. Barst.

In addition to her well-known push and advocacy for the continuation of additional PH clinical trials, Robyn was also known for her instrumental part in establishing PH centers throughout the world, including centers in Japan, Saudi Arabia, and London, to name a few. Various renowned medical centers across the globe invited Robyn to be a visiting professor and to give lectures. Back home, Robyn was also very enthusiastic in her role as mentor to many young physicians and nurses.

"I feel very lucky and fortunate to have had her as my role model and mentor," said Dr. Erika Berman-Rosenzweig, Associate Professor of Pediatrics in Medicine and Director of the Pulmonary Hypertension Center at Columbia University Medical Center. "We had this constant dialogue. I always felt I could go to her for anything. I think she got great satisfaction out of knowing that she trained me in the way she practiced."

Anyone who knew Robyn knew her reputation as a fiercely intelligent, and sometimes intimidating, woman. But through this strong and demanding presence, Robyn was indefinitely and invariably accessible to those who needed her.

Access this article online

Quick Response Code: Website: www.pulmonarycirculation.org

DOI: 10.4103/2045-8932.114781



How to cite this article: Holt C. Robyn J. Barst: An advocate and a wonder. *Pulm Circ* 2013;3:444-6.



Robyn J. Barst at the entrance to Palm Cove Beach in North Queensland, Australia.

"During my first phone call with Robyn as a fellow, I was terrified," said Dr. Dunbar Ivy, Professor of Medicine and Pediatric Cardiologist at University of Denver, Colorado. When asked for Robyn's most memorable quality, Dr. Ivy replied, "Her demand for excellence. She always made things better. And that always motivated us to maintain that excellence."

Robyn was an exemplary and versatile figure in the world of medicine, serving on a multitude of committees, organizations, and publications. In addition to her full-time positions as Professor at the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University (Professor Emeritus after her retirement) and Director of the New York-Presbyterian Pulmonary Hypertension Center, Robyn served on the scientific advisory boards of various drug companies, was an active member in organizations such as the Pulmonary Hypertension Association (PHA), which she helped found, the Pulmonary Vascular Research Institute, and even as an Editorial Board member for this journal, *Pulmonary Circulation*.

"She had this incredible insight where she was able to link her understanding of physiology, drug therapy, and pragmatics in terms of addressing care and research," said Dr. Steven Abman, Professor of Medicine at the University of Colorado, Denver. "She would come up with the tough questions which would challenge everyone to think deeper and work harder. Remarkable. Well, I don't know how to put it...she'll be missed."

Robyn was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer in July of 2009. After her retirement from Columbia in 2008 and her subsequent illness, she continued to stay active in her numerous roles including serving on the Board of Trustees, the Scientific Leadership Committee, and the Corporate Committee of the PHA and she even published two of her 1,861 career-total articles in *Pulmonary Circulation*.



Dr. Robyn J. Barst and colleagues Stuart Rich, John Newman, Michael Fishbein, Erika Berman-Rosenzweig, Rino Aldrighetti, and husband Samuel Barst

"Robyn bore her illness with such dignity and grace, determined to work, and contribute to the very end," said Dr. Sheila G. Haworth, friend and colleague to Robyn. "When I retired she gave me a beautiful, engraved compact mirror which will always remind me of a wonderful lady and my great good fortune in having known her."

To honor her memory, Robyn's family has requested contributions to the Robyn J. Barst Pediatric Research and Mentoring Fund for Pulmonary Hypertension, established by the Pulmonary Hypertension Association, which helps to advance the field of pediatric PH. Additionally, Drs. Jeffrey Fineman and Ian Adatia set up the Robyn Barst Keynote Lecture at the 6th International Conference for Neonatal and Childhood Pulmonary Vascular Disease, which they had originally hoped Robyn would give. The lecture will now be given by Dr. Nazzareno Galié on Saturday, June 22, 2013 in San Francisco, California.

Robyn is survived by her husband, Samuel; her eldest daughter, Nomi and son-in-law, David Berenson; her youngest daughter, Lindsey and her son-in-law, Jason Gumer; her grandson, Tobias Berenson; her sister, Lynn Hofstra; and her mother, Ruth.

"I think toward the end of her life having a 2-year-old grandson was just unbelievable, just so pleasurable for her," said Dr. Barst. "I think her whole life she was waiting for that part of life where she could relax and enjoy spending time with her family and grandchildren. You know, I think that's why they say "don't postpone joy," because you never really know what's going to happen."

And when you think about it, her capacity for love, for joy, and for life must have been absolutely infinite, to fight so tirelessly against a disease so often fatal. Dr. Robyn J. Barst

contributed so much to this world and truly was a wonder, in every aspect of the word.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I never had the opportunity to meet Robyn Barst. So when I started writing this article, I reached out to several of Robyn's friends, colleagues, and family members hoping for just two or three solid interviews. I quickly ran into the trouble of being flooded with multiple interviews jam-packed with praise for Robyn, her numerous achievements, and colorful stories about her life. Thank you to everyone who contributed to the article, and especially Robyn's

husband, Samuel, who provided the most insight into the life and personality of his amazing wife.

Three months ago, just weeks before Robyn's death, the Pulmonary Circulation Editorial Office invited her to continue her membership as an Editorial Board member for *Pulmonary Circulation*. She responded by thanking us for the "gracious invitation," and by saying that she would be "pleased to continue." This was one of the few interactions I had with Robyn, and I can't stop thinking, "What a rockstar."

Christina Holt