



Lifestyle

## Advantage, research: SenioRITA tournament enters 20th year

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### October event one of nine fundraisers held by The RITA Foundation to support cancer programs

The Florida Department of Health reports that Florida has the second-highest cancer burden in the United States. Each year approximately 100,000 new cancers are reported to the Florida Cancer Data System, a statewide cancer registry. \*

The outcome of a cancer diagnosis depends on early detection, advances in medicine and treatment, as well as expert patient care.

Research plays a critical role in the outcome and was a primary factor in creating Research is the Answer — or RITA — a local nonprofit foundation supporting research at the Mayo Clinic and patient care at Baptist Medical Center.

More than 20 years ago, members of the Deercreek Country Club tennis club took the advice of their committee chair Charles “Chuck” Jantz and created a women’s tennis tournament to raise money for charity, specifically local breast-cancer programs. Thus, RITA was born.

The RITA Foundation generates revenue through nine fundraising events, three of which are tennis tournaments. SenioRITA, a women’s 40-plus doubles tennis tournament, celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

RITA Foundation founder and voluntary chairman Jantz said the foundation’s mission is to raise awareness and money to help in the fight against cancer, with an emphasis on breast cancer.

“Our efforts include clinical and basic research, education, awareness and patient-related programs,” Jantz said. “All net proceeds generated by our fundraisers are donated as unrestricted grants to 501(c)(3) programs in the greater Jacksonville area. As an all-volunteer organization, we have no salary or overhead expense so 100 percent of the revenue generated is distributed right here in Jacksonville. Since the establishment of the RITA Foundation, we have granted more than \$4.75 million locally.”

Mayo Clinic and Baptist Medical Center Beaches are recipients of SenioRITA grants.

The breast cancer research of John A. Copland III, Ph.D., Department of Cancer Biology professor at Mayo Clinic Jacksonville, has benefited greatly from the longstanding collaboration with RITA.

“Research using SenioRITA funds has led to discoveries of novel gene targets in breast cancer and the development of a lead therapeutic compound which may lead to life-saving treatment if proven beneficial in clinical trials,” Copland said. “Collaborations among scientists, clinicians and patients, and state-of-the-art equipment, make it possible for promising discoveries in the lab to move more quickly from the lab to the clinic, where they benefit patients. It’s a long, tedious road from lab discovery to clinical trials for FDA-approval of new patient therapies. Our ultimate goal is to find cures for the more than 200 collective diseases we call cancer.”

Another recipient of SenioRITA funds is Baptist Medical Center — BMC/Beaches and Baptist MD Anderson. Located in downtown Jacksonville, Baptist MD Anderson is a hub for cancer care from physician appointments, treatment options, spiritual support, counseling, nutrition, social services to art therapy. It features the nation’s first cancer-specialized Walgreens Pharmacy, a cafe with healthy food selections for cancer patients and the Life Wellness Center, a retail shop with everything needed to support a holistic approach to fighting the disease.

BMCB has used SenioRITA donations in a variety of ways including education, awareness and patient-related breast cancer programs. Donations have helped the underserved/uninsured population and also helped start a lymphedema rehab program. Of major importance is the purchase of specialized equipment.

SenioRITA donations allowed BMCB to purchase endobronchial ultrasound endoscopy (EBUS) technology to diagnose cancers with the potential to spread to the center of the chest.

“When someone undergoes a CT scan and learns there is an abnormal spot in the center of the chest next to their heart and lungs, the first questions usually are ‘How can we find out what this is?’ and ‘Will I have to undergo surgery to find out?’ Pulmonary & Critical Care Specialist J. Danny Pulido, M.D., said. “The stress and anxiety are quite noticeable during the initial consultation, but when we reassure them we can now safely and confidently sample within the chest using EBUS, a minimally invasive approach, and they will be able to go home afterwards, stress and anxiety quickly turn into a more relaxed and confident plan of action.”

The 2019 SenioRITAs at Sawgrass begins with a kickoff party at Pusser’s Restaurant on Oct. 2. The next event is a live and silent auction dinner party Oct. 14 at Sawgrass Beach Club, while the third event is the three-day tennis tournament Oct. 18-Oct. 20 at the Sawgrass Tennis Center, voted a Five Star tennis destination by World Tennis magazine.

The tournament features nearly 300 women from Jacksonville, other Florida locales, Southeast Georgia and several other states. The net proceeds of the last year’s event were \$205,225 — a new record and testimony to the commitment and efforts of supporters, sponsors, contributors, participants and volunteers.

All events are open to the public, and sponsorships for this popular event are still available. Sponsors are featured at the auction party and at the three-day tournament. Donations toward the Memorial Fund will honor family or friends who have been stricken with this cancer. To register, become a sponsor or make a donation, visit [The-Rita-Foundation.org/senioritas/](http://The-Rita-Foundation.org/senioritas/).

*(Statistics from the Florida Department of Health; learn more at <http://bit.ly/2Y3lNgZ>.)*