

# 'Fighting brain cancer is personal': Ponte Vedra foundation gives \$3.6 million to researchers

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For 18 years a Ponte Vedra Beach-based foundation has awarded annual grants to "early career" brain cancer researchers, motivated by the brain cancer survival story of one of its founders.

This year the Sontag Foundation, one of the largest private funders of brain cancer research in the United States, gave a personal record \$3.6 million —

\$600,000 each — to the six winners of its Distinguished Scientist Award. The 2020 grants to four winners totaled \$2.4 million.

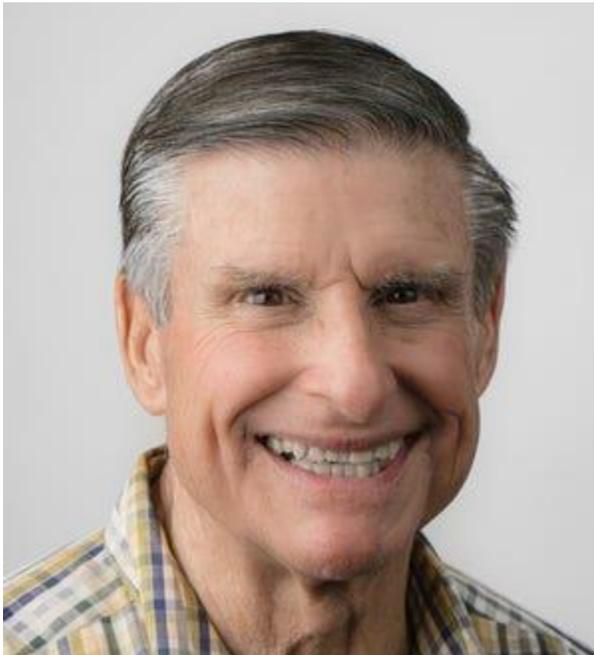
And Susan Sontag, now 78, still outlives a doctor's 1994 prediction that she would be dead in less than three.

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"Fighting brain cancer is personal for my family," her husband, Rick Sontag, said. "This year marks the largest cohort of grantees we have funded since our inception in 2002. This is particularly impressive given most of this year's awardees started their labs during the height of the pandemic.

"We are proud to welcome these exceptional early career researchers into our scientific community," said Sontag, who runs the foundation after a corporate career in aviation components manufacturing.



The grants were awarded through a competitive scientific review process to researchers at academic medical institutions. The recipients are:

- Dr. William Flavahan, University of Massachusetts
- Dr. Ryan Flynn, Boston Children's Hospital
- Dr. Samuel McBrayer, Children's Medical Center Research Institute at the University of Texas Southwestern
- Dr. Sigrid Nachtergaele, Yale Cancer Center
- Dr. Tomasz Nowakowski, University of California, San Francisco
- Dr. Daniel Wahl, University of Michigan.

"This generous support from the Sontag Foundation will allow us to explore new areas of brain tumor biology and will be critical in translating our findings," Yale's Nachtergaele said. "We are grateful to be welcomed into this wonderful community."

The foundation was established in 2002 following Susan Sontag's successful battle with a normally lethal form of brain cancer.

She was diagnosed in 1994 at age 51 after waking up confused and nauseated. Overnight she lost her short-term memory and balance, she said in a 2006 speech.

Sontag survived after radiation treatment and chemotherapy, but with after-effects including slow speech, slow movement and confusion.

"The family experienced firsthand the frustration of dealing with a disease that was not well-understood by either the medical community or the general public," according to the foundation.

That frustration led them to create the foundation, which to date has awarded \$50 million to 61 scientists in the United States and Canada.



Eighteen years' worth of grant recipients will gather in Ponte Vedra in February 2022 for the foundation's annual scientific summit. The intent is to bring them together to "engage in collaborative conversations to drive science forward to make a difference in the field," according to the foundation.

Last year's summit was conducted virtually because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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In 2014 the foundation established The Brain Tumor Network that connects patients and caregivers to brain cancer specialists, second opinions and clinical trials for free.

Also, the organization supports oral health care in Northeast Florida through a dental services partnership between Community Health Outreach and the Sulzbacher homeless center.

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For his work, Rick Sontag recently received the American Brain Tumor Association's Joel A. Gingras Jr. Award, the group's highest honor. The award recognizes "significant contributions to the association's mission through philanthropy, advocacy, discovery or patient care," according to the association.

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### **SONTAG FOUNDATION**

For more information go to [sontagfoundation.org](http://sontagfoundation.org). For free help through The Brain Tumor Network, go to [braintumornetwork.org](http://braintumornetwork.org) or call (904) 395-5220.

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