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Curing breast cancer on Harvard grad's Agenda

Frederick Ellis Dashiell Jr.

Breast cancer is one of the leading causes of death among women in the United States, but relatively few young people understand the disease's widespread impact. Marisa Renee Lee is working to change that.

Lee, a 25-year-old native of Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and Harvard University graduate, is the founder and president of The Pink Agenda (TPA), a nonprofit organization that has raised more than \$100,000 for breast cancer research since its incorporation in April 2007.

While breast cancer is often viewed as an affliction affecting women over the age of 40, Lee targets young professionals — a group she said is often left out of such philanthropic work — through fundraisers like TPA's recent "Couture for a Cure" event held in the South End.

"I felt like [that] was a demographic that wasn't being tapped for fundraising or outreach, so I wanted The Pink Agenda to cater to it," said Lee.

Lee became interested in the cause in 2005 after learning that her mother, Lisa Mae Lee, had been diagnosed with stage 4 metastatic breast cancer.

Lee put her career aspirations on hold for a year and stayed at home to help her father, Samuel Lee, care for her mother, whose compromised immune system left her vulnerable to other diseases like tuberculosis and pneumonia.

On Feb. 28, 2008, Lisa Mae Lee died. The loss motivated Marisa Renee Lee to take action. Initially, Lee asked that in lieu of flowers, donations be made in her mother's memory to "Saving Second Base," a breast cancer fundraiser she had been inspired to start the previous year.

"I watched a particularly dramatic episode of 'Grey's Anatomy,' the one where George's father is diagnosed with cancer," she recalled. "That, and one too many cocktails, made me realize that it was my responsibility to do something."

Lee gathered a group of college friends to throw a party on behalf of "Saving Second Base." The event drew a crowd of young professionals eager not only to support the cause, but also to help Lee expand it.

"I suddenly had a bunch of e-mail [addresses] and phone numbers of people who wanted to help organize the next 'Saving Second Base' function," Lee said. "We went from a party to a group overnight."

After the event, Lee sent the donations collected at the function to two leading outreach organizations, the Breast Cancer Research Fund and Susan G. Komen for the Cure. The move opened the door to a network of fundraisers that were ready to make large donations to Lee's efforts — which, she said, presented "a small problem."

"People can't write checks made out to me for breast cancer research," she explained. "So we had to form an officially recognized organization that could receive those checks."

Lee went to work drafting articles of organization and bylaws. Within 72 hours, Lee had filed for exemption status with the state of New York and "Saving Second Base" was born.

According to Lee, the group changed its name to The Pink Agenda to "reach a more mature audience and because the term 'second base' is going out of style," but noted the organization has been "much more successful" since the switch.

That success has included hosting hip events during New York Fashion Week, as well a large gala in May of this year that raised over \$50,000 for the Breast Cancer Research Fund and Susan G. Komen for the Cure.

Building a successful nonprofit takes a lot of work. Because the young organization has no employees, that work falls to Lee and TPA's executive board, who donate not only their money, but also their time to help operate and expand TPA's fundraising efforts.

Sometimes, Lee admitted, the work spills over into her day job as an analyst for the partnership bank Brown Brothers Harriman & Co.

"My supervisor has been very supportive of my efforts with The Pink Agenda," said Lee. "Sometimes he'll hear me on the phone and think I'm closing a deal when I'm really doing something for TPA."

Lee said her vision for TPA's future includes the organization becoming "synonymous with young professionals and raising awareness and funds for breast cancer research." To that end, the group is branching out from New York to host events in other large cities like Chicago, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and Boston.

Even as she works to expand TPA's reach, increase its community of donors and establish the nonprofit as a viable organization for the long term, Lee said she remains committed to the group's focus on young professionals — and is even prepared to relinquish control when she is no longer one of them.

"I don't want to be running TPA 10 years from now," she said. "I'll be less able to reach them like I can now."

For more information, visit www.thepinkagenda.org.



Marisa Renee Lee (right) sits with her mother, Lisa Mae Lee. After her mother was diagnosed with stage 4 metastatic breast cancer in May 2005, Marisa Renee Lee became interested in raising money for research of the disease, which led her to found the nonprofit organization The Pink Agenda. (Photo courtesy of The Pink Agenda)

The Pink Agenda

The Web site of the nonprofit fundraising organization features information about the events it has held for young professionals, its founder's personal connection to the cause of curing breast cancer, opportunities to donate to research and outreach efforts and more. [More »](#)

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Flanked by boys in blue and men in black, the five "Divas for a Cure" rode their motorcycles into the parking lot of Boston Harley-Davidson in Everett. The parking lot visit was part of a 6,300-mile road trip to promote their cause — finding a cure for breast cancer. [More »](#)

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