



Garding Against Cancer:

Investing in Cancer Research and Patient Care in Wisconsin

On a cold and snowy December night in 2016, more than 75 dedicated Wisconsinites braved the wintery conditions and made the trek to Madison's Edgewater Hotel to be part of something truly special.

They came to support Badger men's basketball coach Greg Gard and his wife Michelle as the couple launched a brand-new initiative known as Garding Against Cancer. While the event was aimed at having a little fun on a chilly evening, it also carried a serious message: cancer still affects too many of us, but there's something we can do about it.

The pitch was simple: invest in cancer research and patient care initiatives right here in Wisconsin. By partnering with the UW Carbone Cancer Center, as well as numerous organizations across the state, money raised here would stay here, helping patients who need assistance now while also funding homegrown research that will lead to tomorrow's cancer cures.

Now, five years and more than five million dollars raised later, Garding Against Cancer is still going strong. Through events and fundraisers – not to mention the overall generosity of everyday Wisconsinites and Badgers at heart – Garding has been able to make good on the promises made during that December night in 2016.

Money raised has funded groundbreaking immunotherapy research, helped purchase state-of-the-art electron microscopes and other equipment, and allowed UW Carbone's Precision Medicine Molecular Tumor Board to expand. That's in addition to also benefiting dozens of communities and partner organizations across the state, who provide various services and care to cancer patients and their families.

But as Greg and Michelle Gard reflect on the first five years of Garding Against Cancer, it's not the big events or even the dollar totals they remember most. It's the moments when they've been able to hold the hands of patients in hospice care, sit with families during times of need, or share their own message of inspiration and hope with those whose lives have been affected by cancer.

"You can have a positive impact and make somebody feel a little bit better in the day that they're in," Greg said. "That's been one of the things probably as or more rewarding than any dollars raised."

Having been on the other side of that equation, the Gards know all too well the pain that comes with a loved one receiving a cancer diagnosis. They know what it's like to get that phone call with the news you never want to hear.

And they know what it's like to begin to heal from loss.



Hard working. Big hearted. A real salt-of-the-earth kind of guy.

Those are just a few of the ways Glen Gard has been described.

“What I remember most about Glen is his smile and how welcoming he was,” Michelle said. “There wasn’t a topic he couldn’t talk about with people, and he always made you feel like you were the most important person.”

Growing up in a small farming community in southeastern Wisconsin, Glen knew the importance of hard work and looking out for your neighbors. During his career as agricultural loan officer, he saw first-hand the impact of money staying local and being invested back into the community. He had a ‘think globally, shop locally’ mentality, something that son Greg – one of three Glen’s children – didn’t fully appreciate until much later.

“I probably learned more about him since he’s passed away than when he was alive,” Greg said. “People have been more willing to share their experiences and stories about him. I’ve learned that his impact behind the scenes was pretty immense.”

In May 2015, Glen Gard was diagnosed with glioblastoma multiforme, an aggressive and relatively rare brain cancer. As with any new diagnosis, it left the Gard family with a lot of hard questions. But one of the first phone calls Greg received after his father’s cancer diagnosis was from UW Carbone Cancer Center director, Howard Bailey, MD.

“I didn’t know who he was,” Greg says with a laugh. “I never had any reason to access the Carbone Cancer Center. But Howard ended up being a sounding board for us through this whole process.”

Glen Gard would go on to receive treatment at UW Carbone, and spoke highly of his care there. But glioblastoma can be a very challenging cancer to treat, and it moves quickly. About six months after his diagnosis, Glen Gard passed away at the age of 72.

Less than two months later, Greg was named interim head coach of the Wisconsin men’s basketball team. While still grieving the loss of his father, he was forced to start thinking about how to position his team for another trip to the National Championship game, where the Badgers had been earlier that year.

But he also began thinking about how he could use his new job for good.

“Knowing we were going to have a platform and a voice, we were looking for a way we could impact and help others,” Greg said.

The Gards had previously supported cancer research, but the loss of Glen to glioblastoma made their connection to the cause stronger – and much more personal – than they could have ever imagined.

So within months, they began taking steps to build an initiative that would not only allow them to raise money for the cause, but do it in a way that would have made Glen proud.

Just five months after organization’s kickoff event, the Gards hosted their first Garding Against Cancer signature event in May of 2017 at the Kohl Center – something that would become Garding’s staple in the coming years.

To go from kicking off a new initiative to hosting a major event in just five months is no small undertaking. But with support from the University of Wisconsin Foundation, dedicated volunteers, a steering committee and a newly-created network of dedicated supporters lovingly known as ‘Point Gards,’ things quickly came together and word began to spread about the event.

To say it was a success would be an understatement. The Madison-based event drew more than 600 attendees and raised over \$1 million for cancer research and patient care in Wisconsin. For the Gards, it was a huge win, but only part of their overall strategy to engage with the state of Wisconsin.

Soon after the event, they began travelling around the state, taking part in a handful of regional events that first year, while also making time to visit with local cancer patients and their families at each stop.

“Being from rural communities, we really wanted to reach out to the wider Wisconsin community,” Michelle said. “It was important



for us to get out there and be able to fund different things, in addition to research, around the state. It's a reflection of Glen, as well"

When Garding comes to town, the goal is to raise money locally, but more importantly, to spend that money locally. With help from the UW Foundation and a dedicated Garding team, Greg and Michelle work with local stakeholders to identify each community's unique needs, and how best to meet them. All locally raised funds from a regional event stays in the region, directly benefiting those in need.

And perhaps it's no surprise that basketball is often the thread that ties these statewide efforts together. Before the basketball season officially kicks off, the Badgers usually play a few exhibition games, including an annual match-up with another UW school. While exhibition games don't count towards a team's record, it doesn't mean they can't count for something.

In 2016, prior to the official launch of Garding, an exhibition basketball game between UW-Madison and UW-Platteville – a team coached by brother Jeff Gard – was used as an opportunity to raise awareness about brain cancer.

Since then, Garding has spun the annual "UW vs. UW" exhibition game into a friendly competition to raise funds in and for local communities, including Oshkosh, Menomonie, La Crosse, Wausau, Whitewater and Janesville, to help meet each location's unique needs.

For instance, much of the \$225,000 raised prior to the 2019 Garding Against Cancer game with UW-La Crosse was used to fund skin cancer screenings, education and prevention efforts in the area, as the melanoma rate in La Crosse County is higher than the state average, according to state data.

Four local organizations – Gundersen Health System, Mayo Clinic Health System, La Crosse County Health Department, Sparta Area Cancer Support, Inc. – all received Garding funds, with some funding set aside specifically to help with additional supportive services for patients.

That allowed Gundersen and Mayo to expand access to cooling caps, which help reduce hair loss for cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy. And it helped Sparta Area Cancer Support, Inc. to provide financial assistance to local cancer patients to help with medical bills, transportation costs, rent payments and food.

So while these exhibition games may not count toward either team's final record, it's hard to argue that they're not some of the most important games of the year.



In addition to its annual signature event and awareness games, Garding Against Cancer has played host to a variety of events throughout the years, including pheasant hunts, golf outings, 5k races and much more.

On top of that, various organizations, companies and even individuals have also hosted their own fundraisers for Garding – all in their own unique Wisconsin way. Churches have hosted fish fry fundraisers. High school basketball teams have hosted competitions. Even elementary schools have gotten in on the action.

"People are continually trying to find ways, even small ways, to help in their communities," Greg said.

Then there was Bucky on Parade in 2018, led by the Madison Area Sports Commission. Combining public art with a love for everyone's favorite mascot, the months-long event featured 85 life-size Bucky Badger statues sprinkled around the Madison area, each one lovingly designed by a local artist. At the event's conclusion, many of the statues were auctioned off, with proceeds benefiting Garding and other community organizations and charities.

Even Garding got a Bucky of its own, designed by UW Health employee-turned-artist Meghan McKinney, who used medication vial caps to create a unique, upcycled look for her "Vial Caps for a Cure" statue.

Suffice to say, momentum was building and Garding was cruising along at a rapid pace.

Then, in March of 2020, preparations were well underway for the 4th annual Garding Against Cancer signature event. With two months to go until the big day, the Garding team was busy securing sponsorships, while developing an exciting and engaging program to create the biggest signature event yet. And beyond that, there were scheduled visits to even more communities around Wisconsin.



But the COVID-19 pandemic quickly upended those plans. All Garding events were suspended, in an effort to keep everyone safe. All were in agreement that it was the right thing to do, but the sudden stoppage in play was jarring – even for a head coach.

“The pandemic threw a complete wrench in the trajectory and movement we had,” Greg said. “And you know that cancer doesn’t stop, it hasn’t taken a time out and taken a back seat to the virus during this time. That’s been a little hard, knowing that we’ve had to put some things on pause. The needs are still there. They aren’t going away, people are still fighting this disease.”

In that spirit, the Gards and event organizers made the decision to pivot and shift the event online at a later date.

So in September 2020, the first ever virtual Garding Against Cancer signature event took place and featured live music, an update on cancer research, and more than a few surprise guests. The event also netted just over \$500,000 in the course of a few hours.

The Gards say they’re beyond grateful for the outpouring of support, especially during a challenging time for many. At the same time, they’re also eager to return to visiting communities all across the state, and having the personal interactions with people that just can’t be replicated over a computer screen.

“We’ve definitely missed that face-to-face interaction,” Michelle said.

In May of 2021, Garding Against Cancer surpassed a major fundraising milestone: \$5 million raised in less than five years’ time.

It’s a number that Michelle Gard calls “stunning.” But it’s also something the Gards say they didn’t expect, or even count on, when they launched the organization.

“We never set out with a financial number in mind,” Greg said. “That never has been the driving force behind it. But we’ve been amazed and very humbled by the generosity of people.”

And just like any good coach, Greg is quick to credit the team

effort that went into hitting that milestone. “This doesn’t happen with just Michelle and I,” he said. “There are so many others that have helped this enormously along the way.”

While it’s natural to reflect back on all that’s been accomplished in the past five years – not to mention the tremendous impact of the millions they’ve raised – it’s clear that the Gards are focused on what comes next. Their immediate plans are to make good on cancelled events, make their way to the communities they had previously planned to visit, and thank Garding sponsors for their ongoing support, especially during the pandemic.

Some Garding traditions have already sprung back to life in the latter half of 2021, including events like the Eno Vino Golf Outing and the Pheasant Hunt. And plans are already underway for an in-person, 5th annual signature event in May 2022.

Beyond that, the Gards say they’re taking things one event at a time, and can pivot easily if the situation calls for it. After all, having launched GAC during a snowstorm, and later carrying it on through a pandemic, they’ve learned that the best-laid plans don’t always go the way you hope, and adaptability is key.

“Going forward, I think our goal stays intact and the overall mission stays intact,” Michelle said. “But we’re pretty flexible in regards to what that looks like.”

So whether it’s crisscrossing the state or meeting with local groups over Zoom, the Gards say they’re more than ready for whatever comes next. And they’ve shown that no matter the venue, their supporters, friends and fans will always be there for them.

And while the Gards love their work, and all that they’ve been able to accomplish, there’s something they’d love even more: finding a cure for cancer.

“That would be the best result,” Greg said. “That there isn’t a need for this anymore.”



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