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`With cancer, it's more like theatre, you have to have a good supporting cast'

April 13, 2007

BARBARA TURNBULL

Dr. Mary Gospodarowicz doesn't want this story to be about her.

"When we talk about the program, we very much talk about it as an ensemble of people," she says earnestly, instantly nixing the notion of a personal profile.

"With cancer, it's more like theatre – if you have a good performance, it's not about two superstars. You have to have a good supporting cast, stagehands and lighting. The superstars alone can really mess up production."

But Gospodarowicz, in her 50s and head of the radiation medicine department, is no mere superstar. Her insight and dedication to the way cancer treatment is now delivered and developed at Princess Margaret Hospital is unparalleled. The Polish-born mother of two has been in Canada for about 40 years, 30 of them working at PMH. She completed medical school at the University of Toronto, training in internal medicine before becoming a cancer specialist.

Her inspiration was the disease itself. "It's a very interesting area, an area where there is lots of change, lots of momentum. The research is always exciting," she says, adding "most physicians that work with cancer ... are motivated by progress, by patients, by philanthropic efforts."

It's hard to find anyone who has not experienced cancer in his or her close circle and Gospodarowicz is no exception. Her personal experience with cancer includes two colleagues, and their deaths cut particularly deep. "You feel like you've failed them," she says.

What keeps her going is the speed with which the area is developing. "You feel like you've had several careers instead of one, because you are constantly changing. It's less stressful because you feel you are actually doing something about it."

The idea for the massive reorganization began to take root about 10 years ago. "I was like an excellent pilot ... (but with an) old plane, no air traffic control, no runway, no computers – all my passengers were in danger, my skill alone was not enough," she says.

Praise for her vision comes in from all corners, including architect Siamak Hariri of Hariri Pontarini Architects, who met with Gospodarowicz and David Jaffray, the head of the radiation therapy physics department, weekly for two years planning the revamp.

"She's an extraordinary human being," Hariri notes. "And she wants to do something that really challenges convention around hospitals."

But that's really not what Gospodarowicz has in mind.

"These days we are so interdependent. If I didn't have brilliant physicists, we wouldn't be doing any of this. If we didn't have very good, committed therapists, none of this would happen."

