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'Labor of love' for Boston lawyer, wife boosts pediatric cancer research, art world

By: Kris Olson February 11, 2022



Gary M. Markoff and his wife, Eliane, with artwork — including Eliane's own — supplied by their organization, Art in Giving

Thirty years ago, Sherin & Lodgen partner Gary M. Markoff and his wife, Eliane, got unbearable news about one of their twin 8-year-old daughters.

Rachel Markoff had complained about double vision, so her parents took her to Massachusetts General Hospital. There, on Jan. 16, 1992, a CAT scan revealed a devastating diagnosis: a brain stem glioma.

Rachel would succumb to the incurable form of pediatric cancer nine months later, a week after her ninth birthday.

The grief over such a loss never dissipates. Indeed, Audrey still finds it difficult to talk about her twin sister, her parents say.

But in the decades since, Rachel's death has also given rise to something beautiful: the organization Art in Giving, which has bestowed over \$2 million in grants for innovative pediatric cancer research since its founding in 1999.

Before she could become the founder of Art in Giving, however, Eliane Markoff first had to become an artist. After

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Even after she established her studio in Boston, Eliane remained a bit sheepish about taking money for her work, given the grief from which it had sprung. Instead, she poured the proceeds from the sales of her pieces into the Rachel Molly Markoff Foundation, Art in Giving's "parent."

As Eliane continued to auction off her art and organize fundraisers for the foundation, other artists would kindly offer to donate their creations as well.

With supply not a problem, Eliane's question soon became how to access a more reliable set of deep pockets of those who would want to acquire all the works artists were making available to her. Eliane's brainstorm was to connect companies with sizable office-décor budgets with artists who could make their visions a reality.

Eliane's initial impulse was to ask artists to contribute 25 percent of their sales to Art in Giving and let them keep the remaining 75 percent. But one of the initial artists noted that painters are accustomed to having the galleries that display their work take 50 percent and suggested that no one would bat an eye if Art in Giving asked for a similar 50-50 split.

Art in Giving's "big break," which the ever-modest Eliane shares only with Gary's prodding, came when someone who worked at Sanofi Genzyme happened to see one of Eliane's pieces on exhibit at the Salon du Louvre in Paris. That sparked a memory of a conversation he had with her months earlier.

At the time, the company was outfitting its new offices in Cambridge and purchased 42 pieces from Art in Giving. That gave the organization its first substantial pool of funds to dole out to cancer researchers.

In the decades since, Art in Giving has given a much-needed boost to fledgling "outside-the-box" research, which the National Institutes of Health will not fund until it begins to show promise.

One of Art in Giving's recent success stories is James K. Chen, chair of the department of chemical and systems biology at Stanford University School of Medicine. Chen was able to parlay two modest \$50,000 grants from Art in Giving into millions of dollars in NIH funding to continue his research into the growth of central nervous system tumors and pharmacological ways to inhibit it.

Over the course of the past two decades, Art in Giving pieces have found their way to commercial real estate agencies such as Alexandria Real Estate Equities, Marcus Partners and Equity Office Properties; Harvard Pilgrim Health Care; life sciences nonprofit Massachusetts Biotechnology Council; and, of course, Sherin & Lodgen.

Gary Markoff says the artwork draws regular comments from clients and other visitors.

"That gives me an opening to explain how it got there and the story behind it, which is great," he says.

It is also gratifying to hear others praise his wife's artistic talents, he adds.

As a barebones operation with no staff, Eliane says it can be challenging to spread the word about Art in Giving. The Markoffs welcome inquiries from law firms that might consider devoting even a portion of their decorating budgets to the cause.

Firms or companies can either buy or lease the artists' existing creations or commission new ones.

Among the current roster of about 40 Art in Giving artists is Rachel's twin, Audrey. A talented muralist, Audrey gave up a career in high tech to focus on her art and conducts team-building workshops for companies in which groups of employees create a mosaic together.

"It's a very special labor of love for us," Gary Markoff says of Art in Giving, "but it has benefits in both the art world and medical research — and the clients."

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