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University of California
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Coming Home for the Cure that Saved her Life

Deborah Cowan was fearless when it came to adventure. After graduating from UC Berkeley in 1968 with a degree in sociology, the Bay Area native spent years traveling on her own to Africa, Asia, and South America.

“She was unbelievably curious about life,” says her cousin, Donna Hirschfeld.

During her travels, Deborah also discovered the answer to her own longstanding medical mystery. For many years, she’d suffered from joint pain and enlarged features on her face, hands, and feet, but never got a diagnosis.

One night at a dinner party in Israel, she met a Russian physician who thought she had an explanation: acromegaly, an endocrine disorder caused by a benign pituitary tumor that results in overproduction of growth hormone. Left untreated, it can lead to disfigurement, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer.

The physician knew of only two places to get treatment: a hospital in Paris or UCSF. For Deborah, going back home was the natural choice.

The diagnosis was confirmed in the late 1970s. At UCSF, she saw Charles Wilson, MD, DSc, chair of neurological surgery from 1968 to 1996 and now professor emeritus. He performed surgery, successfully removing Deborah’s tumor.

“She thought the world of Dr. Wilson,” says Deborah’s sister, Dina Cowan. “She said he saved her life.” Her treatment continued in UCSF’s Endocrinology Clinic, and she helped others with acromegaly by assisting with a support group and newsletter.



Above: Dean Talmadge E. King Jr.
At left: Deborah Cowan

“Gifts to support research allow us to make breakthroughs that save lives. Through her generosity, Ms. Cowan will make a significant difference for future patients.”

Talmadge E. King Jr., MD, dean of UCSF School of Medicine

“She often spoke about that fortuitous meeting with the Russian doctor and being treated at UCSF,” Dina says. “Endocrine disease can be hard to diagnose, and she wanted to help in any way she could.”

Deborah spent her final 20 years back in the East Bay, where she taught high school and pursued creative interests, including landscaping and making silver jewelry that she sold in local galleries. Though never a smoker, she developed lung cancer that metastasized to her brain before it was found. She passed away last March at age 68.

Her estate included a generous bequest for UCSF, and she also designated the UCSF Foundation as the beneficiary of her IRA, earmarking the funds for endocrinology and stem cell research.

PHOTOS: Noah Berger and courtesy Dina Cowan

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