Giving from the heart

WHEN GOOD WOMEN LOVE GOOD CAUSES
Hope for Depression Research Foundation

FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN:
Audrey Gruss

Goal: To cure depression and related disorders — anxiety, bipolar disorder, post-partum depression, prolonged grief and post-traumatic stress syndrome.

History: Founded in April 2006. HDRF functions itself apart by funding pioneering research that integrates the fields of neuroscience with psychology. In the last two years, the foundation has distributed more than $5 million in research grants and endowments.

Original benefactor: Audrey’s husband, former polo player and philanthropist Martin Gruss.

Seed money: $25 million

Why do this? Because I discovered the staggering reality that in the 20 years since the introduction of Prozac and the other SSRIs anti-depressant medications, there has been no change in the basic treatment of depression, just adjustments in the use of existing approaches.

What can others do to help?
Support the foundation, where 100 percent of any dollar donated goes directly to research. (Every other administrative expense is funded by the Audrey and Martin Gruss Foundation.) We’re obligated to raise funds from the public; it can’t just be me supporting a foundation,” Audrey said. Today, $25 million doesn’t go very far. Everybody in America is touched directly or indirectly by depression.

Information: (212) 446-4235 or hopfordsdepression.org

Audrey Gruss was inspired by her mother, Hope, who struggled with depression for decades.

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Dynamite combination: Working from heart, brain

CHARITIES from 1D depression.

“When my mother passed away in December 2005, I had an epiphany moment when I decided to focus all my energies on finding better diagnoses and treatment,” said Audrey. “If I couldn’t help cure my mother of this emotional imbalance in her lifetime, I am committed to do everything in my power to find answers in my lifetime.”

Just a few months later, Audrey, an expert fund-raiser who chaired most major Palm Beach balls, took those skills and combined them with her business and science background to become executive director of her own foundation.

Another Palm Beach woman who’s successfully channeling her energy into a charitable organization she founded is Suzanne Wright. The mother of three was so excited when her first grandson, Christian, arrived in 2001. But when he stopped speaking, stopped communicating, regressed in his potty training and starting getting up in the night and wandering, she knew something was wrong. It took months to get the diagnosis: autism.

“I stood in that room with the team of doctors at Columbia and I was horrified,” she said. “Autism? That’s Rain Man, I thought. Then I found out that it affected 1 in 104 boys and 1 in 168 kids! I wanted to know why those doctors hadn’t gotten the country up in arms that this is happening to a whole generation of children.

“I vividly remember how scared of polio everyone was when I was growing up in the Bronx and Queens. We were all frightened to death of that epidemic and it galvanized this country to find a cause and cure.”

Suzanne felt the alarm needed to be sounded again, so she went to her husband Bob, the chairman of NBC, and said, “There’s a story here.”

A weeklong series eventually launched on The Today Show, and though awareness is up, Suzanne says the epidemic has spread: Last year, the numbers of those affected climbed to 1 in 98 boys and 1 in 150 children.

“Christian was kidnapped by autism,” she insists. “In a period of two months, he was gone and we haven’t seen him again. He sunk to the depths of autism.”

Suzanne likens the experience to losing a child, and said her family grieved for six months. Before she and Bob co-founded Autism Speaks in 2005, her daughter and son-in-law had to agree to “go public” with their family’s story.

Once they did, Autism Speaks launched with a bang. Already it’s the nation’s top funder of autism research, having committed $30 million in new research funding in 2007.

Committed to a cause

Three dynamic women, all in their 60s, all passionately committed to their respective causes. In the past three years, each has been personally motivated to found a charity. Though they brought varying levels of financial support and expertise to the table, all are successful.

“Anybody can do this with whatever level of experience they have,” Audrey said. “You can start a foundation with friends donating money, with your own money or with outside consultants who advise you. The philanthropy departments of banks can help you, so can Foundation Source (which offers support services for private foundations). People have started these from scratch with no experience, but their passion makes it successful.”

Audrey believes the personal touch elevates an organization’s ability to succeed.

“Whatever cause has impacted you, whatever is truly meaningful to you, let it become your passion,” she said. “If there’s a personal story behind your cause, it gives you more impact and allows you to work from both your heart and your brain. That is a dynamite combination!”

And one that has worked for all three women. Despite heartache, each has found a measure of triumph by giving back.

They’ve learned that good works can flourish, even when the motivation is born from pain.

“Difficulties can bring the most positive things to life,” Audrey said. “Watching my mother go through depression was one of the most difficult and negatively charged things in my life — and yet it has become the most positive thing I can do with my life, my capabilities and my resources today.”

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