

Browns Saturday: Billy Cundiff's non-football passion to help others

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BEREA, Ohio -- [Billy Cundiff](#) wants to be the best possible placekicker he can be, for himself and the [Cleveland Browns](#).

But he has another passion, one that provides perspective. That is to do all he can with his foundation to find and develop an early detection test for ovarian cancer, the disease that took his mother-in-law, Colleen Drury.

"This is about telling her story," Cundiff said recently. "We wanted an organization that will be bigger than football, that will last. This will be our lifelong objective."



Browns kicker Billy Cundiff and his wife, Nicole,

established the Colleen's Dream Foundation, named after Nicole's mother, who died in 2013 after battling ovarian cancer for nearly six years. *AP Photo/John Bazemore*

In 2012, Cundiff and his wife, Nicole, established the Colleen's Dream Foundation, named after Nicole's mother, who had four daughters. Drury was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in September 2007. She died in February 2013. In that time, the Cundiffs had a daughter, whom they named Colleen. "Because we didn't think she'd get to know her [grandmother] very well," Cundiff said.

His mother-in-law's fight wound up paralleling Cundiff's career. When he struggled and couldn't catch on with a team, he was home for the more difficult times. When she was at her best, he was kicking.

Cundiff knew very little about ovarian cancer until Colleen was diagnosed. As he studied, he realized there is no early detection test like there is for cervical or breast cancer. A CA-125 blood test is used in conjunction with a pelvic ultrasound and biopsy to diagnose the cancer, according to information on Colleen's Dream website.

The Ovarian Cancer National Alliance and American Cancer Society report that 21,980 new cases of ovarian cancer are detected each year, with 14,270 deaths annually. The number of women who survive five years is 44.6 percent, according to the Alliance.

Cundiff's research has taught him that only 15 percent of cases are caught early, but when caught early there is a 92 percent chance of survival.

Most cases, he said, are caught when the cancer is in Stage 3 or Stage 4, at which point a 10-year outlook is 30-40 percent. Ovarian is the 11th-most common cancer among women but is the fifth-leading cause of cancer-related deaths and is the deadliest gynecologic cancer.

Surgical treatment is invasive and difficult.

"Women diagnosed in late stages almost always have their ovaries removed, and some end up with a colostomy bag," Cundiff said. "When they remove the ovaries, they go through surgically induced menopause.

"There are emotional issues, and physically, they have to look at an awful chemo[therapy] regimen. They know what's facing them, and it's awful. As much as anything, we've learned when we meet these women how important it is to just talk to

them, to hear their story and provide them with hope."

Cundiff has taken a personal interest in patients he has met, traveling to Earling, Iowa -- a small town right outside of his hometown of Harlan -- this season to be at the visitation and with the family of a woman who had just died. The woman, Nadine Kenkel, became a good friend of the Cundiffs through their work and attended the foundation's gala last year in Phoenix. Above her right ankle she had tattooed the teal ribbon for ovarian cancer, with the words "Break the Silence" to signify the lack of information about the illness.

In the first year and a half with the foundation, Cundiff has given away more than \$131,000 in grants to young researchers at Johns Hopkins, the Cleveland Clinic and Memorial Sloan Kettering. A recent grant of \$10,000 was presented to Hiu Wing Cheung at the Hollings Cancer Center at the University of South Carolina.

The Cundiffs run the foundation with the help of Michele Drury (Nicole's sister) and Jeff Seaman, a college teammate of Cundiff.

"None of us get paid," Cundiff said. "My wife and I pick up the majority of administration costs. Almost all the money goes right to research. We're really lean, but we have a lot of fun."

The foundation matches donations up to \$5,000 from NFL kickers in the Kicking For The Dream Program and gives that money to a research institution that is geographically close to their team. The thinking: This helps the money go farther. NFL kickers and

punters -- including [Spencer Lanning](#) of the Browns -- make donations based on achievements, such as made field goals and punts inside the 20.

The Evening of Dreams Gala is the main fundraiser, and it includes a golf tournament and black-tie dinner in Phoenix, where the Cundiffs live. More than \$100,000 was raised in that weekend alone the first time it was held.

Within one year of starting Colleen's Dream, the foundation was the largest ovarian cancer-specific private organization in the state of Arizona and is now one of the largest in the country (based on how much money is raised and distributed), Cundiff said.

"At first, it was really tough for my wife and her sisters," Cundiff said. "But what ended up happening is they were able to take all their grief and pour it into a positive endeavor. It's really taken off. It gives them a chance to essentially relive all the good moments with their mom and talk about her legacy. They get to talk about their mom a lot, and they love it.

"She was a really endearing personality, so caring. And now, we get to talk about her vision for the world."