

## Julie Gralow, MD

### gralow\_julie1.jpg



Dr. Julie Gralow has made it her personal mission to help women with breast cancer live healthy, fulfilling lives. This commitment has taken her beyond the clinic and into the lives of many of her patients, whether in her home town of Seattle or as far away as Ukraine and Uganda.

Dr. Gralow's passion for cancer care was sparked when she was an undergraduate at Stanford. She landed a part-time job as a lab technician with renowned cancer researcher Dr. Ron Levy, who was testing a new approach to treating lymphoma.

"I remember feeling like we were doing the coolest thing in the world," reflected Dr. Gralow. "And I thought what a career - to be able to take a promising idea from the laboratory to the patients' bedside. I loved the blend of research and patient care, and I knew from then on that I wanted to become an oncologist."

Three decades later, Dr. Gralow is a leading breast cancer specialist and researcher in her own right, serving as Director of Breast Medical Oncology at the University of Washington and an active member of the American Society of Clinical Oncology. While many things have changed during her career, she points to the growing number of cancer survivors – and the increased focus on their long-term wellbeing – as one of the most exciting trends.

“The evolution of cancer survivorship, and promoting healthy lifestyles for survivors, is an area I've been most thrilled to see and participate in. We still have a long way to go, but I've seen the incredible difference that survivorship programs can make in patients' lives.”

## [gralow\\_julie2.jpg](#) [1]



Dr. Gralow became personally involved in these efforts in the 1990s, through her work with Team Survivor, a non-profit organization that organizes group exercise opportunities for women affected by cancer.

She originally joined the program to coach some of her own patients, who were training for a Team Survivor-sponsored triathlon. But the day before the race, she decided she wanted to do more than sit on the sidelines: she wanted to cross the finish line with her patients. So without any training, Dr. Gralow completed her first of many Team Survivor races.

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Today, Dr. Gralow still serves as a national leader for Team Survivor and leads a local affiliate group, Team Survivor Northwest.

“Participating side-by-side with my patients, whether it's a half marathon or a triathlon, has been huge in my life,” she said. “It's incredibly rewarding to help these women set a goal, train hard and achieve it.”

Encouraged by these experiences, Dr. Gralow later started exploring ways she could improve breast cancer care for women outside of the United States. In 1997, she joined a multi-year breast cancer project in the Ukraine, where she provided training to local doctors on the latest chemotherapy, diagnostics and supportive care approaches.

While there, she and her colleagues also decided to try to change a long-held Ukrainian medical custom, in which doctors did not disclose or discuss patients' cancer diagnoses.

“Doctors in Ukraine were taught not to tell women that they had breast cancer,” she said. “They believed women would commit suicide if they knew. Women were told they had a serious infection that needed to be treated with breast surgery and strong antibiotics. But these women knew they had breast cancer: they were treated in the chemotherapy ward of a cancer hospital. It just made the experience so much more scary and difficult.”

The team identified a small group of healthcare providers who were interested in a more open approach. They worked together to develop culturally appropriate ways to speak openly with patients about their diagnosis. To Dr. Gralow's surprise, this new approach quickly took hold - among both providers and patients. Soon, a new network of breast cancer survivor support groups arose.

“It was incredible,” she said. “These support groups spread like wildfire because, for the first time, women felt allowed to talk openly about their disease.”

Inspired by these women and by the breast cancer advocacy movement in the United States, in 2003 Dr. Gralow helped organize and secure funding for the first-ever Eastern European/Central Asian Breast Cancer Advocacy Conference. Later this year, the conference will take place for the fifth time, in Lithuania, bringing together patients, physicians and government leaders from 17 countries.

“It's amazing to see these women supporting each other, getting ideas and learning how to better advocate for better research, resources and care,” said Dr. Gralow.

Most recently, Dr. Gralow joined a Harvard University task force that is exploring ways to improve cancer care in developing countries, and is helping to establish a new cancer hospital in Uganda. Together with a Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center and University of Washington team, Dr. Gralow is training the hospital's staff and educating women in nearby rural communities about women's health and cancer prevention.

“The way we're approaching cancer in Uganda is very different from what we do in the U.S.,” she said. “There, it has to be cheap, feasible, and use far less technology than we do here. But it's fascinating to see how we can do so much good with little amounts of money. I think there

are great lessons to be learned, which we can ultimately apply to provide better, more cost-effective care for our patients here at home.”

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**Julie Gralow, MD**, is the recipient of ASCO's 2008 Statesman Award for her extraordinary volunteer service, dedication, and commitment to the Society. She is currently Director of Breast Medical Oncology at the University of Washington and has dedicated her life to fighting breast cancer. She is committed to improving quality of life for breast cancer patients through education, exercise and diet, and to promoting breast cancer awareness in the community.

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#### **Links**

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/file/4256>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/file/4261>