

# In honour of giving

## University recognizes Brandon couple's contributions to cancer research lab

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A local couple had tears of joy when Brandon University recognized their financial support for its breast cancer research lab on Friday.

The plaque for the Butler Family Foundation was unveiled outside the research lab as a surprise for Gerald and Carmen Butler, which brought an emotional response from them both.

"I don't usually break down like this," Gerald said with tears in his eyes, "but Brandon University and Brandon College are so close to my heart."



Gerald and Carmen Butler, longtime supporters of Brandon University and the Breast Cancer Cell and Molecular Research Laboratory, stand in front of a plaque put up in honour of their family foundation on Friday afternoon. (Michele McDougall/The Brandon Sun)

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“This is wonderful, but really, we’re here to help people,” Carmen said as she kissed her husband.

The Butlers have a family foundation and Brandon University is one of its main recipients. In the last two years, they have donated \$50,000 to the BU Breast Cancer Cell and Molecular Research Laboratory, which is run by Dr. Mousumi Majumder.

This most recent pledge is for annual donations of \$25,000 to continue to support the lab, its students and their studies.

“When I heard Dr. Majumder speak at an alumni event, it just broke my heart when I heard how many women had almost four years to live once diagnosed with breast cancer, and that just didn’t seem right. But if the lab can do something for them, we support it,” Gerald said.

Majumder’s lab had its grand opening in 2023, which was made possible by several grants that she applied for, totalling \$2.5 million, from organizations that included the Canada Foundation for Innovation, the Breast Cancer Society of Canada and Research Manitoba.

The ongoing donations from the Butlers will take the pressure off, Majumder said, and allow her to concentrate on her research instead of spending time looking for grants and filling out applications.

“Every day,” Majumder said, “there is some application that we are putting forward. So the day we run out of grant money, that research door is going to be closed. That’s how it is, and that’s why we’re so grateful.

“We are on the right path, doing a tremendous work with some outstanding trainees in the laboratory and have made progress in breast cancer research,” she said.

Majumder’s vision is that one day, blood tests will detect breast cancer as early as possible — which is relevant in Manitoba, where women aren’t eligible for mammograms until they are 50.

Dr. Majumder and her trainees are studying the relationship that tiny genes — called microRNAs — have with breast cancer.

They hope to use the mRNAs as biomarkers to spot cancer earlier through blood tests and are also examining how they could be used to develop improved therapies.

One of Majumder’s students, Carter Williamson, is doing his master’s degree in environmental and life sciences.

He said he was it was a “massive surprise” when he learned the Butler family wanted to donate for an extended period of time.

“I’m looking at how triple negative breast cancer, which is a more aggressive subtype of breast cancer, develops resistance to chemotherapy, and looking at in terms of metabolism — different changes that happen and how they develop resistance.



Gerald Butler smiles as he puts on the jacket he once wore as a student of Brandon College. Butler and his wife, Carmen (seated on the left), are longtime supporters of Brandon University and the Breast Cancer Cell and Molecular Research Laboratory. On Friday, a plaque in their honour was unveiled at the lab. (Michele McDougall/The Brandon Sun)

“And then we’re trying to see if we can prevent them from developing resistance.”

As Williamson stood next to the Butlers, he added: "I was absolutely amazed (about the funding), and it means a ton to us that the funding will allow us to continue."

Gerald Butler grew up in Brandon and is a 1963 graduate of Brandon College, earning a bachelor of science and certificate in education one year later. The college received its university status in 1967.

"Going to Brandon College was a life-changer for me," Gerald said, "and we've been very fortunate. So we started giving because ..." his voice trailed off with emotion.

Carmen picked up where her husband left off and said, "It's like family."

This is Homecoming Week for BU alumni and the reason why both Butlers wore vintage jackets and scarves at the surprise unveiling.

Gerald said his dream is to inspire other university alumni and have more people donate what they can, whether it's time or money.

"This day makes me think of a quote I know," Gerald said.

"I knew a man, some thought him mad. The more he gave, the more he had.' In other words, as you give, there's a replenishing that goes on."

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