

# Sisterly Love Forges New Scientific Path To Save Jon



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## BECAUSE THE CLOCK IS TICKING

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**L**isa Boyette, MD, PhD, needs to beat primary sclerosing cholangitis (PSC) before the disease destroys the liver of her brother, Jonathan. With help from mentors at Pitt and across the country, Boyette has sidestepped the traditional framework of biomedical scientific inquiry to find a more agile way.

“I didn’t want to take 10 years to get to a place where I was starting to help him,” Boyette says of her decision to found a nonprofit organization after completing postdoctoral training at the University of Pittsburgh’s Thomas E. Starzl Transplantation Institute (with which she remains affiliated) in 2014.

Called SAVE JON, the organization aims to concentrate the widest possible range of expertise on new treatments to halt or slow the progression of PSC, an autoimmune disease that typically leads to liver failure within 10 years of diagnosis. Jon Boyette was diagnosed with PSC five years ago at age 21.

Other than liver transplant, no therapies that can stop PSC exist today, and patients are at risk of developing cancer before a donor organ is available. SAVE JON, however, is quickly gathering high-level support.

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“These types of diseases are usually underrepresented with respect to research focus,” says SAVE JON cofounder Dietrich Stephan, PhD, professor and chair of human genetics in Pitt’s Graduate School of Public Health. “Very few have even heard of PSC, let alone developed programs, because the market’s so small. But those lives are no less valuable.”

Boyette’s drive appeals to Stephan, who founded a number of biotech companies before joining Pitt’s faculty. With Jeremy Berg, PhD, Pittsburgh Foundation Professor of Personalized Medicine in the Department of Computational and Systems Biology and Pitt’s associate senior vice chancellor for science strategy and planning, health sciences, Stephan urged Boyette to forge a path to discovery that matched the boldness of her vision.

In addition to Stephan, SAVE JON’s board includes Boyette’s postdoctoral mentor, Fadi Lakkis, MD, Frank and Athena Sarris Professor of Transplantation Biology in Pitt’s Department of Surgery.

Also on board is retired NFL head coach and Pitt football legend “Iron Mike” Ditka, whose Chicago Bears roster included running back Walter Payton. Known as “Sweetness” for his effortless grace, Payton died in 1999 from PSC-related liver cancer.

The innovative and extensive “collaboration, partnership, and engagement” for which SAVE JON’s backers strive are exactly the kinds of activities being advocated by Pitt Chancellor Patrick Gallagher, who announced a renewed University-wide focus on research-based entrepreneurship in early 2015.

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SAVE JON has established a base within the offices of the Pittsburgh Technology Council. More information is available at <https://save-jon.org>.