

Stamp of Awareness Comstock's, June 2004

It isn't easy to pin down Dr. Balazs "Ernie" Bodai, Director of Breast Surgical Services for Sacramento Kaiser Permanente. Bodai, renowned for the overwhelming success of his brainchild postage stamp to benefit breast cancer research, keeps a 24/7/365 schedule that would grind most people into the ground. But Bodai isn't most people, and while some might be content to rest on their laurels if they achieved half of what he has accomplished, the 53-year-old Bodai says he is just getting started.

"I would go nuts if I tried to slow down now," Bodai says.

It isn't a theory likely to be tested any time soon. The breast cancer stamp is rapidly approaching 530 million in total sales, recently passing the Elvis Presley stamp to become the biggest seller in U.S. Postal Service history. That translates to more than \$40 million in revenue for breast cancer research. Congress recognized the stamp's incredible power in January when it renewed it for another two-year run. But Bodai is anything but content with semi-annual pleas to Washington to keep the stamp in play. Having already conquered King and country, Bodai is now set to take on the world.

"This has been kind of a difficult thing for me because every two years the stamp expires, so we have to keep going back to Washington and playing the game to keep it going," Bodai says. "I'm hoping that will stop now with this latest mission."

Ah yes, the latest mission. Bodai is currently working to get the governments of Australia, China and Kenya to adopt an international version of the cancer stamp, with the European Union next in line. It would mark the first time in history such a fundraising stamp was issued on the international level. He has already begun his own personal lobbying effort, traveling to China in April to meet with government medical officials to talk about the stamp's possibilities there. Although the trip was on a tight schedule, he of course made time to visit hospitals to educate physicians about the disease and to hand out free copies of his book, "I Flunked My Mammogram," that had been recently translated into Chinese.

It doesn't stop there, as he is now set to tour several American and Australian cities this summer with singer and breast cancer survivor Olivia Newton-John (he is helping her to promote an early breast cancer detection product; she is helping him gain support for the Australian stamp). He has also begun trading regular e-mails with Kenyan officials about the project, with a trip there a very real probability sometime soon.

"People like Dr. Bodai help show the international community can work together," says Ulli Haslacher, president of Olivia Newton-John's company, Liv International. "This really is a peaceful way for governments to come together. Efforts like this from Dr. Bodai show there can be a true global community."

Bodai is also keeping up a regular speaking schedule, mostly at fundraisers for cancer research. He is booked for speeches through 2005, and somewhere in there he finds time to perform between 300-500 breast cancer surgeries every year as well as overseeing Cure Breast Cancer, Inc, a non-profit he started to raise money for cancer research and benefits. Even his own bout with prostate cancer in 2000 only slowed him down “for about a week.”

While most would consider such a schedule to be pure insanity, Bodai says it is really nothing special to him, noting his own insatiable need to keep busy.

“I really thrive on multi-tasking,” he shrugs. “I don’t know if it is a blessing or a curse.”

“Ernie never rests,” adds Renjie Yuean, director of the Davis Medical office of Kaiser Permanente and the person who arranged Bodai’s China trip. “He is a very passionate person whose mind is always working, night and day. I wish sometimes that he would slow down, but Ernie is on a mission.”

Therese Nakata, Breast Car Program manager under Bodai and his chief assistant for the last 12 years, agrees but says it is useless to try to get him to ease the throttle back.

“I tell him to slow down all the time,” she says. “There are moments when it just seems like too much, but whenever we step back it never lasts for long. He’s not built that way.”

Some of that boundless energy is also being showcased in yet another project a lot closer to home. Earlier this year Bodai agreed to first endorse and then become the medical director for NutraCea, a nutritional supplements company based in El Dorado Hills. The company makes and sells a variety of dietary supplements based on rice bran, a previously unusable bi-product that was normally thrown away in the harvesting and milling process. But recent technological innovations have allowed the rice bran to be converted into a dietary supplement, the promise of which caught Bodai’s attention last year. But his decision to endorse the products six months later brought on criticism from some cancer groups who questioned whether his involvement with NutraCea meant that Bodai had sold his soul to Corporate America.

While acknowledging the need to be very careful in stating what nutraceuticals can do, it is a charge Bodai strongly rejects. He also admits to his fair share of skepticism at first about the medical benefits of rice bran products, but changed his mind after seeing a close friend suffering from lupus regain a high level of energy and health after using NutraCea’s products for 90 days.

“I’ve seen some tremendous results with some of the patients we have given the supplements to,” he says. “I’ve become very personally involved as an observer before I ever became affiliated with the company.”

That personal connection spurred him to re-think his feelings and to investigate the products further. His research led him to believe that while rice bran was certainly not a cure for cancer, it was a viable product for addressing some aspects of that disease as well as other general health concerns.

“One thing we know is that the outer rice coating contains 107 different anti-oxidants,” Bodai says. “These are believed by some researchers to help fight cancers because they are scavengers of free-oxygen radicals that damage the DNA in human cells. These anti-oxidants sequester the radicals and therefore prevent them from damaging the DNA. They offer other benefits as well, including helping to control cholesterol and stabilizing blood sugar levels in diabetics. And, it also serves as a great bulk laxative, which if used properly is definitely associated with some decrease in some forms of colon cancer and bowel disease. The bottom line is that this is a line of products that may help someone, but most importantly won’t hurt anyone.”

Bodai says that he has a lot of anecdotal evidence about the supplements, but he also understands many women might respond to his affiliation with the company as if he was saying rice bran will definitely cure cancer. This makes him anxious to establish more medical credibility for the line. Thus one of his major responsibilities with NutraCea will be to set up double-blinded clinical trials that will reveal exactly what kind of effects users are seeing. To help facilitate his role in research and development, in March Bodai also joined NutraCea’s board of directors.

He knows that his corporate affiliations, speaking tours and infomercials rub some people the wrong way. Bodai admits that he lends his name and energy to several commercial products, but he also is quick to note that he rejects far more ventures than he endorses, and that he exercises extreme diligence in researching and verifying a product’s validity before he agrees to sign on.

“I get approached literally every week by some company that wants me to endorse a product,” he says, pointing to the drawers, shelves and countertops of his office that are cramped with various products sent to him for this inspection. Most he will pass on immediately, others he will investigate more closely. Only those he feels will actually provide a legitimate benefit to fighting breast cancer will get the coveted seal of approval.

“Ernie dove into every product to ensure himself that it was safe and effective,” says Patricia McPeak, NutraCea’s Chairman and CEO, who attributes any negativity about Bodai’s extracurricular work as “just jealousy.”

“The breast cancer stamp has been so successful that a lot of people forget that Ernie spent \$150,000 of his own money in getting that approved,” says McPeak. “And, he has never asked for anything for himself. All this man has done is to help suffering people and to raise millions of dollars for breast cancer research.”

Richard Zmuda, a medical writer who co-wrote all of Bodai's books and the founder of the Mid-Atlantic Breast Cancer Information Exchange in Baltimore, says all of Bodai's notoriety does make him a target for other groups who resent the attention he gets.

"There is a lot of egos, competition and jealousy out there," Zmuda says, much of it from other cancer groups who think he profits personally from his ventures.

"That is just silly," Zmuda says. "Every cent he has ever made from the stamp and the non-profit has gone into research. For most of his career he didn't even get reimbursed for his travel costs for his speaking engagements. Even now he does most of them for free."

If the criticism bothers him, he hides it well. He says, however, that it does rankle him at times that people think he somehow makes extraordinary profits from his work. Bodai has recently signed on with a talent agency to manage his speaking appearances, something he says is a necessity given the hundreds of requests that come in every year. His fee is about \$3000, a mere pittance in comparison to many high profile people who populate the speaking circuit. To put it into perspective, six-time Tour de France winner and former cancer patient Lance Armstrong commands \$100,000 per speech. Even minor celebrities often take in \$30,000 per appearance. Most have never saved a single life.

If Bodai is not overly concerned with faint criticism, perhaps that is because he has faced much worse in his life than a few negative vibes from onlookers. Born in Budapest in 1951, Bodai and his family escaped the country in 1956 during the Hungarian Revolution. More than half of the 300 men, women and children in the group he was in were either killed or sent back, but his family made it to a refugee camp in Austria. Eventually the family emigrated to New York and then California. After receiving his undergraduate degree from UCLA Bodai headed north to the UC Davis medical school, right about the time the university was struggling with the Alan Bakke reverse-discrimination case. He says it wasn't easy being a white male medical student then, but he survived and even prospered, eventually landing at Kaiser in 1983 as a surgeon.

He admits that sometimes he does feel burned out by it all, mostly after attending the funeral of a patient he could not save. But he says a good night's sleep revives his enthusiasm, as does the sense of honor he feels that women will seek him out for their care. When he does take a break, Bodai says it is usually to play a few games of racquetball and hang out with his wife and two sons, both of whom work for Kaiser as well. He admits the hectic pace of his work hasn't always been conducive to a family life, but that these days he and his kids are very close.

Politics has also caught his eye of late. He was recently on the short list of doctors under consideration for U.S. Surgeon General, and both parties have asked him to run for office. He admits he strongly considered it, but eventually decided he was better off in the ER than in Washington.

"It took me 35 years to get here," he says. "I really should just stick to what I know."

What he knows is fighting cancer. Although most people associate him with the breast cancer stamp, he has also had a hand in a domestic violence stamp and is currently in the process of getting the U.S. Postal Service to issue a prostate cancer stamp as well. He thinks the prostate stamp will get issued, but doubts it will ever have the impact of the breast cancer stamp.

“My real goal now is to reach a billion in sales on the breast cancer stamp, and to get it into the global community,” Bodai says.

It won't be easy bringing these disparate groups together, but those around him say that if that is what he wants, then it is a safe bet it will happen.

“Ernie is like a bulldog when he gets an idea,” says Zmuda. “He is just persistent as hell. The biggest mistake anyone could ever make is to underestimate him. He takes that as a personal challenge.”

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