While undergoing cancer treatment, George Holway was determined to keep playing with his grandkids.

“When the grandchildren would come to visit, they got to fingerpaint with him,” said his wife of 40 years, Diana Holway. “He couldn’t run around with them, so I’d put art supplies on the floor and there they’d go!”

It’s no wonder that George’s grandchildren remember him, even those who were very young when he died in 2012.

Ten years earlier, George had been diagnosed with multiple myeloma. In this type of cancer, abnormal white blood cells build up in bone marrow, forming tumors and preventing the bone marrow from making healthy blood cells.

Just as he had found a creative way to play with his grandchildren, George was open-minded about treatment. Under the care of Ravi Vij, MD, associate professor of medicine in oncology at Washington University, he participated in genetics studies and clinical trials for drugs that later received FDA approval.

At the time, multiple myeloma had a five-year survival rate.

“If it wasn’t for Siteman Cancer Center and for Dr. Vij’s team, he wouldn’t have lived as long as he did,” Diana said.

The couple was so impressed with the team at Washington University that they made gifts toward multiple myeloma and breast cancer research. After George’s death, Diana and her children — Susan Maher, Lindsey Smith and Paul Holway — made another gift.

“The Holway gifts were transformative, helping us initiate many multiple myeloma studies and identify mutations that contribute to the disease,” said John F. DiPersio, MD, PhD, chief of the Division of Oncology and deputy director of the Alvin J. Siteman Cancer Center at Barnes-Jewish Hospital and Washington University School of Medicine.

The pilot research led to three successfully funded National Institutes of Health (NIH) grants, one Department of Defense grant, and grants from organizations such as the Multiple Myeloma Research Foundation.

Michael Tomasson, MD, associate professor of medicine, is focused on understanding the disease’s mechanisms.

“We know there is a pre-malignant phase of myeloma, which can be detected with a blood test,” he said. “If we could figure out who is going to get multiple myeloma and interfere with that process, we could catch myeloma early.”

In the past few years, Washington University has been recognized nationally for its role in advancing research and accelerating the approval of multiple myeloma drugs.

“We’re now among the top half-dozen respected centers in terms of myeloma research, spanning the spectrum from basic science to translational to clinical,” Vij said.