Alzheimer’s Association Chicago Rita Hayworth Gala
By Dana Getz

The 26th annual Alzheimer’s Association Chicago Rita Hayworth Gala recognized the newer, younger face of early onset Alzheimer’s last Saturday, raising over $1.5 million for medical research and care giving programs.

A record-breaking 900+ guests gathered at the Hilton Chicago for the event, enjoying cocktails, dinner, dancing, auctions and a special live performance by Grammy award-winning artist Richard Marx.

Led by an entire family for the first time ever, co-chairs Debbie Mendelson Ponn, Sharon and Scott Markman and Blythe and David Mendelson followed in their parents’ footsteps, who co-chaired the event in 1997.

“Like so many others, our family has been impacted by Alzheimer’s disease, and we are honored by those who choose to stand with us and join our passion for the cause,” David Mendelson said. “We are determined to recruit new advocates and educate generations about this devastating disease. Together, we fight as a family and an Association to live in a world without Alzheimer’s.”

Mendelson Ponn said that originally her brother David and his wife were approached to co-chair the gala, but after talking it over they agreed they wanted to organize the event as a family.

“It’s a great party that’s bringing awareness to those who may not know about the disease and it’s raising vital funds for the Alzheimer’s Association,” Mendelson Ponn said. “We’re dancing for a good cause tonight.”

The siblings, however, decided to take a different approach than their parents did 15 years ago, focusing on exposing the increasingly younger face of Alzheimer’s. An estimated 200,000 under the age of 65 are now living with the disease, according to the Alzheimer’s Association.

“Alzheimer’s is growing at a faster pace than anyone could have imagined,” David Mendelson said. “This is not your grandparents’ face…the face of Alzheimer’s today is the face of your entire family.”

With the help of Scott Markman’s team at The Monogram Group, Inc.—whose $20,000 creative transformation was completed free of charge—the siblings aimed for an energetic and youthful theme for the gala.

“We wanted it to be tied to Rita but in a very different way,” Scott Markman said. “We had to find a way to evolve her person but not make it about her as much, and make it about the cause and a very good evening.”

The result was “Step On Board,” a call to action for both the committee and the rest of the room. Scott Markman said while the event was originally about family and tradition, this year’s gala invited guests to “step on board with an old, elegant, retro-hip kind of thing,” featuring images of train travel and the glory days.

For Scott Markman, who has attended the event for the past 20 years, the gala has become a part of his life, though co-chairing the event for the first time brought special meaning to his presence.

“To be one of the guys to work so hard on this and to stand up on that podium looking out at the crowd was so frickin’ cool. It was just awesome,” Scott Markman said.

Princess Yasmin Aga Khan, daughter of Rita Hayworth, commended the committee’s hard work, as well as the contributions of honorees including Civic Award acceptors the Moscow Family, Alzheimer’s Association Corporate Award receivers the Guggenheim Partners and Alzheimer’s Association Medical and Scientific award recipient John C. Morris, MD.