

Bernard Siegel Takes on a Tough Cell

Before becoming a passionate advocate for therapeutic stem cell research, Bernard Siegel, A.B. '72, J.D. '75, founded the Miami Tropics, a minor league basketball team, and served as commissioner and co-owner of Florida Championship Wrestling, two profitable ventures that he calls “the candy store of life.” His skills as an attorney and sports promoter have since helped him build the Genetics Policy Institute, or GPI, a nonprofit think tank that responds to what he calls “the foes of stem cell research who utilize the cultural fear of human reproductive cloning to steer key policy.



“It is a scientific breakthrough of the first magnitude,” Siegel says of the type of stem cell research known as nuclear transfer (therapeutic cloning), which holds promise for treating myriad ailments, including paralysis, diabetes, cancer, Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, multiple sclerosis, and Lou Gehrig’s disease.

Siegel’s crusade began in 2002 when he filed a motion to appoint a temporary guardian for the supposed cloned child created by a group touting itself as the “first human cloning company.” Ultimately Siegel helped discredit those claims. “To my surprise, this turned into a worldwide cause célèbre,” recalls Siegel, who has two grown children with his wife of 30 years, Sheryl Siegel, B.Ed. '72. Siegel left his busy Coral Gables law practice in 2003 to focus full-time on GPI. The institute now has an advisory board composed of several of the world’s leading research scientists and physicians, including the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine’s Juan Dominguez Bendala, Ph.D., Luca Inverardi, M.D., Camillo Ricordi, M.D., and W. Dalton Dietrich, Ph.D.

“It was one of the most compelling moments of this journey,” Siegel says of meeting the late Christopher Reeve in Bedford, New York, where he and a film crew taped a message from Reeve that was played twice at the United Nations in 2004. “It had an impact on the delegates in their decision making on these issues.” Adds Siegel, “We derailed a Bush administration strategy backing a Costa Rican proposal for a worldwide treaty that would have banned potentially lifesaving therapeutic cloning.”

Sabrina Cohen, B.S. '99, a quadriplegic since a 1992 automobile accident and associate director of GPI, observes, “Many people might be afraid to make such a bold move, but Mr. Siegel believes in what he’s doing.”

– Leonard Nash