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Anchors to Stage Live Cancer Benefit

By JACQUES STEINBERG

ABC, CBS and NBC have agreed to set aside the same hour of prime-time television on the first Friday night in September for a live, joint telethon benefiting cancer research, representatives for the networks said in interviews. Among those who encouraged the networks to put aside their competitive instincts, albeit temporarily, was Katie Couric, anchor of the “CBS Evening News,” who will appear on the fund-raiser alongside her principal rivals, Brian Williams of NBC and Charles Gibson of ABC. All three have had immediate family members die of the disease, and another principal, Jeff Zucker, the president and chief executive of NBC and Ms. Couric’s former boss, is a colon cancer survivor.

To publicize the benefit, which is being called Stand Up to Cancer, Ms. Couric will return on Wednesday to NBC’s “Today,” the program she left in 2006 after more than a decade. (Her former partner, Matt Lauer, teased her return on Tuesday’s program, coyly saying she was coming back to make a major announcement.) On “Today,” Ms. Couric will be joined by Mr. Gibson and Mr. Williams, who are also expected to appear with her on Wednesday on “Good Morning America” on ABC and “The Early Show” on CBS.

“It just seemed like a great opportunity to reach out to the whole national community and say we need to galvanize the country,” Ms. Couric, whose husband and a sister died of cancer, said in an interview last week.

“Wanting to do it was sort of a no-brainer for everyone,” Ms. Couric added. “Working out the particulars, the date, the length of the special, who will be involved, etc., etc., took a little effort.”

While the three networks have engaged in similar collaborations before — including after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina — the hourlong commercial-free benefit they will stage on Sept. 5 is the first such effort in recent memory that will not have immediately followed a catastrophe.

It will seek to steer money to two main areas of research: translating basic science into new therapies, and developing innovative, out-of-the-box treatments that might not otherwise be financed. The organizers say they will emphasize that recipients work together in teams.

The idea of setting aside an hour of prime time to raise money for cancer originated with several groups of people, including those working in television and in the film world in Hollywood.

Mr. Zucker said in an interview that it was an idea that he and Ms. Couric had discussed before she left NBC.

“I think we both thought it was a good idea,” he said. “When she moved over to CBS, she talked about it with some folks over there.” Among them was Leslie Moonves, the president of CBS.

“The networks are not — I don’t want to say — competitive,” Mr. Moonves said in an interview. “We are. But we are not as unsharing as people think we are.”

Separately, a serendipitous thing happened in the chemotherapy room of a Los Angeles doctor: Noreen Fraser, a television producer, spied Laura Ziskin, a movie producer. Both were receiving treatment for breast cancer, and Ms. Fraser later asked the doctor to make an introduction.

When they eventually spoke, Ms. Fraser, who helped found a charity dedicated to raising money for women’s cancers, floated the notion of a cable television special, said Ms. Ziskin, whose producing credits include the “Spider-Man” series and “Pretty Woman.” Ms. Ziskin proved a receptive audience.

“I’m frustrated by the pace of new therapies to save my life and other people’s lives,” she said.

Soon others were drawn into the conversation, including Sherry Lansing, former chief executive of Paramount Pictures; Lisa Paulsen, president and chief executive of the Entertainment Industry Foundation; Ellen Ziffren, a philanthropist, and her husband, Ken Ziffren, an entertainment lawyer; and Ann Sweeney, president of the Disney-ABC Television Group.

“The idea that the networks could bring this cause front and center was potentially very powerful,” Ms. Sweeney said.

Eventually, these disparate efforts coalesced with those of Ms. Couric, who has used her television platform to raise awareness, to say nothing of millions of dollars, for colon cancer, which claimed her husband, Jay Monahan, in 1998.

It is too soon to know exactly what the show they will develop will look like. Ms. Couric, Mr. Gibson and Mr. Williams are each planning to produce a news segment for the show that will focus on a particular area of research.

As for the stars who will appear and what they will do, Ms. Ziskin, who will produce the show, said, “It’s my job to make cancer entertaining.”