$50 million gift endows USC brain research institute

$50 million gift from Mark and Mary Stevens will endow and name the USC Mark and Mary Stevens Neuroimaging and Informatics Institute

A USC alumnus and his wife are donating $50 million to a USC brain research institute to advance progress in understanding one of biology’s most complex and important puzzles: the brain.

The gift from Mark and Mary Stevens will endow and name the USC Mark and Mary Stevens Neuroimaging and Informatics Institute. Located at the Keck School of Medicine of USC on the Health Sciences Campus, the institute partners with schools and programs on both campuses, given the interdisciplinary nature of its work. In addition to collaborating closely with the USC Viterbi School of Engineering, the institute works with faculty in biology, genetics, biostatistics, computer science, mathematics, pharmacology and numerous other disciplines.

The Stevens’ gift promises to improve the lives of people worldwide by quickening the translation of basic research into new therapies, preventions and cures for brain injury and disease, including Alzheimer’s, schizophrenia and traumatic brain injury.

In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Mark Stevens said that he and his wife consider neuroscience to be “the next great frontier in medicine and science.”

Stevens said in the interview that he has “a front row seat” to the toll of such neurological diseases as Alzheimer’s, from which his father suffers. “If you look at the spectrum of neurological disorders, I would argue that it touches more families than cancer and heart disease. It touches youth and it touches old age,” said Stevens.

Led by professors Arthur Toga, PhD, and Paul Thompson, PhD, along with a team of more than 130 faculty and scientific staff,

Continued on page 4
In Las Vegas, where good luck is everyone’s dream, a chance meeting in 2013 put two men — one a successful entrepreneur and philanthropist, the other a renowned physician and author — on a path that they hope will change medicine and save the lives of countless cancer patients.

The entrepreneur, Emmet Stephenson, was participating in a conference at the Bellagio for investors when he attended a talk by Keck School professor David B. Agus, MD. “I was there as an investor. Just by pure luck, I met David,” Stephenson recalled.

The bond they began to forge that day would eventually lead Stephenson, along with his wife, Toni, and daughter, Tessa, to pledge $10 million to further Agus’ pioneering efforts to change the way cancer is viewed and treated. Their gift will establish the Stephenson Family Personalized Medicine Center at the Center for Applied Molecular Medicine (CAMM) at the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

“Diseases were categorized by body part in the 1800s, and we’ve categorized cancers by body part since then. Prostate. Breast. Lung. Whatever tissue they start in,” Agus explained. “I think what we’re learning now is that it’s not the tissue — it’s the pathway. It’s the context.

“Personalized medicine is really about bringing new technologies to bear to bring a whole new classification system for cancers.”

The idea of using technology to improve medical care makes a lot of sense to the Stephensons, who created Internet publishing firm Domain.com Inc., founded tech company StarTek and run Stephenson Ventures, a portfolio management and private equity company.

Like her parents, USC alumna Tessa Brand is dedicated to philanthropy and to making sure that her donations are meaningful. She is donating half of the $10 million because she believes that Agus’ ideas are worthy of her support.

“Dr. Agus is forward-thinking. He is thinking 100 years into the future. He plans to change the face of health care rather than solve a single problem,” she said. “He thinks bigger than most people, and he is the type of person we want to support.”
Gift of $7.5 million establishes Hastings Center for Pulmonary Research

With the goal of enhancing research related to lung disease, the Hastings Foundation has pledged $7.5 million over five years to establish the Hastings Center for Pulmonary Research (HCPR) at the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

The center brings together basic and translational researchers and clinicians to create a nationally recognized center of excellence for advanced lung disease that builds on existing collaborations within and outside of Keck Medicine. Directing the center will be Zea Borok, MD, chief, division of Pulmonary, Critical Care and Sleep Medicine at Keck Medicine of USC.

“We expect this generous gift from the Hastings Foundation will help us greatly enhance pulmonary research and clinical medicine at Keck Medicine of USC,” said Borok, who is also professor of medicine and biochemistry and molecular biology at the Keck School.

The center’s research will focus on lung injury, repair and regeneration in an effort to discover new treatments and cures for pulmonary diseases that affect millions of people worldwide, including cystic fibrosis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis.

“We are pleased with the pulmonary research we’ve seen at the Keck School of Medicine and felt we could expand on that history by establishing the center to provide a focal point for research and recruitment of faculty,” said David Tirrell, PhD, president of the foundation's board of directors.

Chronic lung disease affects tens of millions of people in the United States. The HCPR will bring together all scientists at USC currently working on lung-related investigations to create shared resources as well as opportunities for scientific interaction and collaboration, thereby expanding the scope of lung research at USC.

“The Keck School is dedicated to finding new treatments and cures for everything from cancer to Alzheimer’s disease to restoring hearing and eyesight,” said Keck School of Medicine of USC Dean Carmen A. Puliafito, MD, MBA. “We’re grateful to the Hastings Foundation for their support of our work to cure lung disease.”

Transforming Medicine, Transforming Lives

Alumni, patients and friends have given more than $836 million to advance research, enrich medical education, enhance patient care and strengthen infrastructure, as part of the Keck Medicine of USC Initiative. These generous gifts and pledges support the ground-breaking work of the Keck School of Medicine, the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center and Keck Medicine of USC.

The Initiative, part of the $6 billion Campaign for the University of Southern California, is building towards its ambitious goal of $1.5 billion. It aims to support efforts to recruit and retain stellar faculty, provide them with state-of-the-art facilities, give patients cutting-edge care, prepare the next generation of practitioners and researchers, and magnify contributions to human health.

For more information about the Keck Medicine of USC Initiative, or to join our community of donors, please contact Melany Duval, senior associate dean at the Keck School of Medicine of USC and associate vice president of health sciences development at (323) 442-1531 or melanydu@usc.edu.
Multiple sclerosis expert recruited to Keck School

Neurologist Daniel Pelletier, MD, has been recruited from Yale University to lead the USC Multiple Sclerosis Center, effective April 1.

An internationally renowned multiple sclerosis clinician and researcher, Pelletier joins the Keck School of Medicine of USC as professor of neurology, chief of neuro-immunology and multiple sclerosis, and vice chair of research for the Department of Neurology. He also holds the Eric and Peggy Lieber Chair in Neurology.

Multiple sclerosis, or MS, is an unpredictable and often debilitating disease that interrupts information flow between the body and the brain, affecting an estimated 2.5 million people worldwide, according to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society (NMSS). Current treatments aim to manage symptoms and delay progression of disability, as no cure yet exists for the chronic disease.

Pelletier’s immediate goals include the expansion of MS patient services at USC and the development of MS research programs focused on neuroimaging, genetics, epidemiology, biomarkers and neurodegeneration. Additionally, as MS patients now have access to more complex but highly effective therapies that require close monitoring and MS-specific expertise, Pelletier’s team will provide tailored approaches using state-of-the-art facilities.

His primary research interests revolve around the implementation of new neuroimaging techniques to predict, monitor and more accurately define factors responsible for MS progression. He brings with him more than $2 million in research grants from the NMSS and the National Institutes of Health, and he received the Harry Weaver Neuroscientist Scholar Award from the National Multiple Sclerosis Society in 2005.

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Continued from page 1

the institute and its Laboratory of Neuro Imaging were brought to USC in 2013. Over its three decades, the institute has amassed the world’s largest repository of healthy and diseased brain images, along with medical and cognitive data from around the globe.

The institute unites scientists from around the world to understand the brain at an unprecedented level, examining its structure and function in health and disease. Among many seminal achievements, the institute’s interdisciplinary pioneers were among the first to map the spread of Alzheimer’s disease in the living human brain and to create digital 3- and 4-D brain atlases to examine the effects of neurological diseases.

“With this landmark gift, Mark and Mary Stevens enhance their already spectacular philanthropic legacy,” said USC President C. L. Max Nikias. “They significantly widen the scope of their support for American higher education and bring their philanthropy to particularly pressing and important areas of inquiry. Neuroscience has been called ‘the final frontier’ in medical science’s progress toward a fuller understanding of human life and human health. Through the Stevens’ support, USC researchers will have the opportunity to address many of the most pressing questions in medicine today.”

The generosity of Mark and Mary Stevens has long supported both researchers and students at USC. Following previous naming gifts for the USC Stevens Center for Innovation and the Stevens Academic Center for student-athletes, this gift now places them among the ranks of the largest benefactors to the university in its 135-year history. Their gifts have made a lasting impact in areas ranging from student scholarship and athletics to engineering and innovation, and now to medicine and the life sciences.
Graduates advised of ‘sacred trust’ bestowed by patients

The weather was gray outside Galen Center on Saturday, May 16, but inside it was bright with cardinal and gold as MD, MD/PhD, MD/MBA and MD/MPH graduates buzzed with excitement during commencement ceremonies for the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

Just before 3 p.m., the 168 medical degree recipients donned red caps and gowns, exuding pride as they readied themselves to march into the arena to the tune of pomp and circumstance.

“It’s an amazing day,” said MD candidate TC Scotton, who will attend the psychiatry residency training program at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA this summer. “Today is the culmination of four long years of hard work and sacrifice. Seeing my classmates and their families all dressed up today puts it all into perspective.”

Henri Ford, MD, MHA, vice dean of medical education at the Keck School, opened the ceremony by congratulating the Class of 2015 and acknowledging key faculty members. Carmen A. Puliafito, MD, MBA, dean of the Keck School, acknowledged the six staff members from the Keck School and Los Angeles County + USC Medical Center who recently traveled to Nepal to provide medical aid following the April 25 earthquake.

“These extraordinary individuals are role models for our medical students because they show the importance of community service on a global scale,” said Puliafito.

Charles Gibson, journalist and former ABC News Good Morning America anchor, gave the commencement address, which made parallels between the medical and journalism professions.

“Both of our professions involve a sacred trust,” said Gibson. “Journalists give a voice to those who might not otherwise be heard. As doctors, you have the sacred trust of caring for people. Giving them the health they need to be as productive as possible, as contented as possible, as hopeful as possible, and as fully realized human beings.”

On May 13, the Keck School awarded 173 master’s degrees in a variety of biological and biomedical fields, 132 master’s of public health degrees, 43 PhD degrees and four master’s of academic medicine degrees.

In the audience was Christine Hogan, an ROTC scholar who earned a master’s degree in pathology while training for the military. After her six-year contract with the Army, Hogan plans to attend medical school and pursue her goal to become a global leader in health care.

“People ask me why I am going into active duty rather than work in a lab or in corporate America. But I believe that nothing is more important than serving our country as a medical services officer in the United States military,” said Hogan, who has been selected to be trained as a medical evacuation pilot and fly Blackhawk helicopters. “Life is too short not to pursue your dreams and do what you want to do.”
A six-person medical response team from the Keck School of Medicine of USC spent nine days on a mission to deliver supplies and assist with critical care of victims of the catastrophic 7.8 magnitude earthquake in Nepal on April 25.

Arriving on May 5, the team provided care at Nepal Orthopaedic Hospital in Kathmandu and at Amppipal Hospital in Gorkha, near the epicenter of the quake.

The USC team departed for home shortly before a 7.3 magnitude aftershock that struck about 90 miles from the epicenter of the first earthquake.

The response was spearheaded by Keck School of Medicine Dean Carmen A. Puliafito, MD, MBA, and Demetrios Demetriades, MD, chief, division of trauma and surgical critical care, Department of Surgery, Keck School of Medicine, along with other members of the trauma and surgical critical care team. Both the Keck School of Medicine and the LAC+USC Medical Center provided medical supplies for the trip.

All members of the Nepal team were part of a similar effort in 2010 after an earthquake in Haiti. The Nepal group included two critical care/trauma surgeons, an emergency department physician, an anesthesiologist, a nurse anesthetist and a registered nurse.

Members of the medical response team: Lydia Lam, MD, trauma surgeon and assistant professor, Department of Surgery; Ramona Paolim, registered nurse, LAC+USC Medical Center; Karen Kim Embrey, CRNA, assistant professor, Department of Anesthesiology; Edward Newton, MD, interim chief and professor, Department of Emergency Medicine; team leader Kenji Inaba, MD, trauma surgeon and associate professor, Department of Surgery; and Shihab Sugeir, MD, assistant professor, Department of Anesthesiology.

Team leader Kenji Inaba and his colleagues look at images from post-operative patients during rounds in a trauma center in Kathmandu.
Emeritus Professor Shaul G. Massry, MD, was awarded the Distinguished Faculty Award and two graduates of the Keck School of Medicine of USC received alumni awards at the second Keck Scholarship Gala on Saturday, March 7, at Town & Gown on the University Park Campus.

The annual celebration of donors and students who have received medical scholarships in 2014 and 2015 also serves as a fund-raiser to support medical scholarships.

Carmen A. Puliafito, MD, MBA, dean of the Keck School of Medicine of USC, told those in attendance that their donations enable exceptional students to pursue medical studies, conduct research and assist with hands-on patient care regardless of their socio-economic circumstances.

“We can only compete to attract the best and brightest students — men and women who will ultimately become our future residents, faculty, physicians and researchers — by offering full and partial scholarship,” Puliafito told the crowd. “Your generosity will impact not only the excellent training of our talented medical students, but also the lives of the many patients they will help throughout their careers.”

The event’s emcee was Fritz Coleman, longtime weathercaster for KNBC-TV in Los Angeles. Coleman has been active in charitable causes throughout his 32-year career as a local on-air personality.

Massry is the former chair of nephrology at Keck School of Medicine of USC and president of the Meira and Shaul G. Massry Foundation, which awards the Massry Prize to recognize outstanding contributions to the biomedical sciences and the advancement of health. Twelve recipients have gone on to receive Nobel Prizes.

Antonio T. Alamo, MD, a 1991 graduate of Keck School of Medicine of USC, received the Alumni Service Award. He runs a private internal medicine practice in Las Vegas and is chairman of Nevada’s gaming commission.

The recipient of the Distinguished Alumni Merit Award is J. Mario Molina, MD, who earned his USC medical degree in 1984. He is president and CEO of the Fortune 500 company Molina Healthcare, Inc., which serves more than 6.6 million beneficiaries of Medicaid and Medicare in 17 states and two U.S. territories.
Keck School of Medicine Vice Dean Henri Ford, Dean Carmen A. Puliafito and commencement speaker Charles Gibson.

Dean Puliafito with emcee and KNBC-TV weathercaster Fritz Coleman at the March 7, 2015 Scholarship Gala.

President of the Commonwealth Fund and former national coordinator for health information technology in the Obama Administration, David Blumenthal with Dean Carmen A. Puliafito at a March 31, 2015 Dean's Distinguished Lecturer Series event.

County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors recognizes the Keck School’s medical response team for their work in Nepal at a presentation on May 26, 2015. Pictured from left to right are Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas; Supervisor Sheila Kuehl; team member Ramona Paolim; Keck School Senior Associate Dean for County Affairs Glenn Ault; LAC+USC CEO Daniel Castillo, Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich; team members Karen K. Embrey, Kenji Inaba, Edward Newton, Lydia Lam; Supervisor Hilda L. Solis; and Supervisor Don Knabe.