Business leader and USC Trustee Rick J. Caruso and his wife, Tina, have donated $25 million to endow and name the USC Tina and Rick Caruso Department of Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery, one of the nation’s largest and most highly ranked for research and treatment of diseases of the ear, nose and throat.

The Carusos’ exceptionally generous gift also names and endows the department’s affiliated treatment center for young children with severe hearing loss. This funding for the USC Caruso Family Center for Childhood Communication will enable the center to expand its leadership as the region’s top resource for testing and therapies that enable children to hear.

The USC Caruso Department serves patients facing a range of conditions affecting the head and neck, such as cancer, thyroid disease, facial paralysis, chronic sinusitis and tumors of the cranial base. As a key program within the department, the Caruso Family Center’s life-changing technologies and services allow children to experience sounds — from their parents’ voices to music, laughter and nature — often for the very first time.

For the Caruso family, these advances carry great personal significance. With a daughter impacted by hearing loss at birth, the Carusos have experienced first-hand the challenges of early-onset hearing loss. Inspired by their experiences, the family has steadfastly supported pioneering research, health care and education. With this gift, Rick and Tina Caruso build on that legacy of support, and align this specific philanthropic focus with the research and treatment advances taking place at USC.

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Popovitches augment family legacy of USC support with $4 million gift for cancer research

Continuing a family tradition that spans six decades, USC Trustee Jane Hoffman Popovich '65 and husband J. Kristoffer Popovich '65, MBA '70 have pledged $4 million to create the Jane and Kris Popovich Chair in Cancer Research at the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center.

The couple's gift is a new chapter of generosity and support in the family's long history of giving to the university. Directed by the Hoffman Foundation, the gift will create an endowed faculty chair to advance cancer research on the center's top priorities in basic and translational research.

"After 60 years of research, we're still looking for cures to all cancers," Kris Popovich said. "We hope this gift will spur progress toward a much-needed breakthrough."

Jane Popovich's parents, H. Leslie and Elaine Stevely Hoffman, created the Hoffman Foundation in the 1950s, contributing millions of dollars to the campaign supporting USC's Master Plan, and more toward construction of the Elaine Stevely Hoffman Medical Research Center and the H. Leslie Hoffman Hall of Business Administration.

Following in her parents' footsteps, the couple continued the tradition through a lead gift of $5 million to build Jane Hoffman Popovich and J. Kristoffer Popovich Hall, home of USC Marshall School of Business MBA programs, which opened in 1999. The couple later donated an additional $5 million to establish the Popovich Family Scholarship Fund. Including this latest gift for cancer research, their lifetime gifts to the university support in the family's long history of giving to the university. Directed by the Hoffman Foundation, the gift will create an endowed faculty chair to advance cancer research on the center's top priorities in basic and translational research.

The Popovitches' latest gift to USC Norris demonstrates the breadth of their philanthropy, as well as their commitment to helping our university advance its mission of teaching, discovery and service — and eventually eradicate — cancer," said USC President C. L. Max Nikias. "For six decades, Jane and Kris Popovich have been passionate supporters of their alma mater, and the USC Marshall School would not be the business education leader it is today without their exceptional generosity and guidance."

Cancer research is a major focus of the Popoviches' charitable giving and involvement, and a 1995 gift from the Hoffman Foundation endowed the H. Leslie Hoffman and Elaine S. Hoffman Chair in Cancer Research at the Keck School of Medicine of USC. In addition, Kris has served as a member of the Board of Overseers of the Keck School of Medicine and was also involved with the Norris Cancer Research Associates. They also are major supporters of Children's Hospital Los Angeles and other causes, along with their three daughters and sons-in-law, Kimberly and Robert Shepherd, Tricia and Michael Fink, and Jennifer BA '96 and Christopher Allen MBA '09.

Keck School of Medicine establishes USC Alzheimer’s Therapeutic Research Institute

The Keck School of Medicine of USC has established the USC Alzheimer’s Therapeutic Research Institute (USC ATRI) in San Diego. Distinguished Alzheimer’s disease scientist Paul Aisen, MD, is the founding director of USC ATRI, effective June 21, and is being proposed for professor of neurology at the Keck School of Medicine.

Aisen will lead the institute in pursuit of its mission to accelerate the development of effective treatments for Alzheimer’s disease through innovative, collaborative, multicenter clinical trials.

"Dr. Aisen has been a leading figure in Alzheimer’s disease research for more than two decades, having developed novel methodologies as well as designed and directed many large therapeutic trials," said Dean Carmen A. Puliafito. "We are proud to have him join USC, where his expertise and leadership will help the Keck School and USC create a leading hub of basic, translational and clinical research in neuroscience and neurological diseases."

To accomplish this ambitious goal, USC is actively recruiting transformative faculty researchers to focus on the human brain and its role in numerous medical conditions, including Alzheimer’s and multiple sclerosis.

These efforts align closely with President Barack Obama’s BRAIN Initiative, announced in April 2013. The establishment of the USC ATRI with Aisen as director adds a strong clinical research program to complement USC’s existing strengths in Alzheimer’s research.

“The Keck School of Medicine of USC provides an optimal environment for this research program,” Aisen said. “Close collaboration with Keck investigators, including Drs. Arthur Toga and Paul Thompson at the USC Mark and Mary Stevens Neuroimaging and Informatics Institute, Dr. Helena Chui at the Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center and Dr. Berislav Zlokovic at the Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute, will facilitate rapid progress in data sharing and analytical methods central to the drug development process. USC ATRI will be the clinical outlet for testing new treatments.”

Eye Symposium marks 40th year at USC for Ophthalmology Department

A capacity crowd of almost 400 ophthalmologists and optometrists participated in a June 19 symposium that marked the Department of Ophthalmology’s 40th anniversary at USC.

The gathering at The Huntington in San Marino represented a “who’s who” in ophthalmology from around the country.

Hosted by the USC Eye Institute under the direction of Rohit Varma, MD, MPH, the all-day symposium was opened by USC president C. L. Max Nikias. Thomas E. Jackiewicz, MPH, senior vice president and CEO of Keck Medicine of USC, and Dean Carmen A. Puliafito of the Keck School of Medicine of USC were also in attendance.

Paul Aisen is the founding director of the USC Alzheimer’s Therapeutic Research Institute in San Diego.

Dean Carmen A. Puliafito, Eye Institute Director Rohit Varma, USC President C.L. Max Nikias and Keck Medicine of USC CEO Tom Jackiewicz helped celebrate the 40th anniversary of ophthalmology at USC.

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Major gift supports research of pre-leukemic diseases at Keck School of Medicine

Entertainer and industrialist Norbert Gehr lost his battle with leukemia in February at age 74, but his family foundation's $20 million gift to the Keck School of Medicine of USC for research may help others fight their own.

Gehr was the founder and CEO of The Gehr Group, a privately held, Los Angeles-based multinational organization with interests in international trade, real estate, manufacturing, wholesale and distribution.

Diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia (AML) two years ago, Gehr had great respect for his Keck Medicine of USC doctors — internist David Goldstein and hematologist Casey O’Connell — and wanted to support their research as part of his legacy.

The gift will be split between the research efforts of O’Connell and Goldstein. O’Connell will use the gift for translational research into blood diseases such as myelodysplastic syndromes, which can lead to leukemia, and AML, the most common adult acute leukemia.

Goldstein's research includes practical methods for improving delivery of health care through a team-based, coordinated approach. He is chief of the Division of Geriatric, Hospital, Palliative and General Internal Medicine and vice chair for clinical affairs for the Department of Medicine at the Keck School of Medicine.

David Lifschitz, MBA ’86, Gehr's longtime friend and current CEO of the Gehr Group, said that Gehr wanted to help other patients by finding a cure to blood cancers, even though he wouldn't live to see the benefit.

Goldstein said the gift will create a new Center for Implementation Science at the Keck School of Medicine that will coordinate efforts across the entire university to improve patient care in a scientifically rigorous manner.

"It was a privilege to care for Norbert Gehr for some 30 years. Not only was he a corporate giant, he was a leader with great optimism and compassion. He demonstrated great loyalty to his colleagues and employees," Goldstein said.

"Mr. Gehr was much more than a generous philanthropist; he shared his generosity of spirit to all who met him. The Gehr Foundation's gift will provide an enduring impact on health care delivery in its support of innovative medical interventions."

Puliafito honored for contributions to physician training and patient care

K eck School of Medicine of USC Carmen A. Puliafito, MD, MBA, has received an award honoring his contributions to medicine from National Medical Fellowships (NMF), an organization founded in 1946 that provides scholarships to underrepresented minority students in medicine and the health professions.

Puliafito was given the NMF Excellence in Academic Medicine Award at the annual Los Angeles Champions of Health Awards ceremony, which was held in June at the Molina Healthcare Event Center in Long Beach.

NMF President and CEO Esther Dyer applauded Puliafito for his leadership in the field of ophthalmology and technical innovations, and his efforts to increase the minority student population in the sciences as dean of the Keck School.

$25 million gift will support otolaryngology at Keck School

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“This gift reflects the Caruso family's far-reaching and passionate commitment to USC,” said USC President C. L. Max Nikias. “As benefactors, Rick and Tina Caruso inspire so many throughout Los Angeles and our nation, and we should all warmly applaud their generosity.”

The Caruso’s teenage daughter, Gianna, was born with mild to moderate hearing loss, and doctors and therapists have worked closely with her ever since. Although Gianna could hear some sounds with assistance, she relied on reading lips to ensure she understood what was being said. This presented challenges in daily life, including in the classroom. That all changed as Gianna experienced a miracle last year, Caruso said, when she saw the team of USC doctors who provided her with a new highly sensitive hearing device that was inserted into her ear canal.

"The minute the hearing device went in, there was a huge difference. Gianna immediately started crying—all of us started crying," Caruso said. "It was a life changer.

"In the future, we hope that this gift will help the Caruso family continue their philanthropic vision,” Puliafito said. "It will allow them to change lives right here at Keck School."
On Not Getting Lost in Translation

The exact molecular and genetic defect that causes sickle cell disease was discovered more than 60 years ago, in 1949. In spite of knowing its molecular basis for decades, there is still no treatment for the disease.

Christopher Austin, MD, director of the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS), used this fact to illustrate the fact there is a gap between knowing what makes people sick and finding effective treatments during a July 9 lecture in Aresty Auditorium.

“Translational science is poorly done,” said Austin, explaining that translational science describes the science that takes basic research discoveries and develops and tests them for clinical uses. “It is costly, time-consuming and inefficient.”

There are hurdles at every stage of the process of translational science, said Austin, which is why the National Institutes of Health established NCATS in 2002. During his speech, part of the Keck School of Medicine’s Deans Distinguished Lecturer Series, Austin shared some of the ways NCATS is trying to make the process of translational science quicker, more effective and less costly.

One initiative was to develop a network of more than 60 academic medical institutions, including USC’s Southern California Clinical and Translational Science Institute. By pooling their resources instead of acting alone, he explained, these so-called NCATS hubs can improve clinical trials by creating a patient recruitment database and centralizing the painstaking reviews and contract negotiations that can delay clinical trials for years.

NCATS is also working to pair academic research with pharmaceutical companies in ways that are beneficial to both. He said NCATS helped London-based AstraZeneca find academic researchers in the United States when one of its cancer drugs wasn’t testing well. It has since been resurrected as a possible treatment for Alzheimer’s disease.

NCATS has also created resources such as a chemistry genomics center to help scientists get past the barriers of developing assays and chemical library screening methods. It is also establishing new and novel ways to help scientists more quickly predict toxicity.

Translational science remains a difficult undertaking, but Austin reminded the audience of Keck School faculty and students why it is worth it. He pointed out that scientists have identified the molecular defects responsible for nearly 5,500 diseases, but only 500 of them have an FDA-approved therapy.

“This is an unbelievable time to be in translational science because you have a real opportunity to help people,” he said.

Emergency medicine leader recruited to Keck School

Carl R. Chudnofsky, MD, has been recruited from the Albert Einstein Medical Center to lead the Keck School of Medicine of USC’s Department of Emergency Medicine, effective August 1.

“Dr. Chudnofsky is an established leader in emergency medicine, having successfully managed a complex emergency medicine department within a challenging organizational structure: a private teaching hospital that responds to and fulfills the enormous emergency department demands of a major public hospital,” said Keck School of Medicine Dean Carmen A. Puliafito, MD, MBA.

Chudnofsky began his 26-year academic career at the University of Massachusetts and University of Michigan, and is currently Chair of the Department of Emergency Medicine at Einstein Healthcare Network and professor in the Department of Emergency Medicine at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia.

Among his responsibilities, he oversees the Emergency Medicine Residency Program at Einstein Medical Center, a fully accredited, longstanding residency program with a Level One Trauma Center that receives over 100,000 annual emergency department visits. Einstein serves a multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic urban patient population with a mix of medical, surgical and trauma related pathology. It is one of the busiest Level One trauma centers in Philadelphia, and one of the region’s largest tertiary care facilities. The Emergency Medicine Residency Program comprises 20 full-time, board-certified attending physician faculty and 60 total residents in its four-year program. It boasts a first- time pass rate in written exams of 99%, and 97% in oral exams.

Chudnofsky graduated from The George Washington University School of Medicine and completed his residency in emergency medicine at the University of Cincinnati Medical Center.

He succeeds Ed Newton, MD, who has served as interim Chair of the Department of Emergency Medicine since August 2014.

Popoviches augment family legacy of USC support with $4 million gift for cancer research

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Jane Popovich, who shares her parents’ conviction that personal philanthropy is key to community growth, added, “I’m proud to follow in my parents’ tradition of giving back to the USC community. I hope to preserve their memory and legacy through gifts such as this, as well as by staying involved.”

Stephen Gruber, MD, PhD, MPH, director of USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center, praised the Popoviches for their generosity. “Jane and Kris understand the importance of investing in translational research, which is key to bringing the knowledge generated through basic science to the patient’s bedside,” said Gruber, who holds the Hoffman Chair in Cancer Research. “Thanks to their generosity, USC Norris can support outstanding faculty who will be able to develop innovative care that will benefit cancer patients. We are deeply honored and grateful for this gift.”
The Merkin Family Foundation establishes four assistant professorships in regenerative medicine at USC

In the past two years, USC’s Department of Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine has welcomed six new assistant professors to its ranks — and more are on the horizon. Thanks to a gift from the Merkin Family Foundation, four of these talented young faculty members will be awarded Richard N. Merkin Assistant Professorships in Regenerative Medicine.

By establishing the Merkin Fund for Professorships in Regenerative Medicine, the gift enables USC to retain the most outstanding young faculty members and to provide them with career-shaping resources. These resources will support their efforts to obtain external funding and tenure-track success, and to transition to the next phase of their careers.

“This gift supports USC’s progress in assembling and cultivating one of the most dynamic teams of research scientists in the field of regenerative medicine,” said Andy McMahon, PhD, chair of the Department of Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine. “I am confident that these faculty will make transformational contributions to human health in the years to come.”

In addition to the prestigious recognition of being named a Richard N. Merkin Assistant Professor, each awardee will enjoy three full years of support and training. He or she will also receive access to a unique fund dedicated to promoting collaborations with clinicians in order to propel laboratory research into the patient-care setting.

“I’m delighted to establish the Merkin Fund for Professorships in Regenerative Medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of USC to further support research and discoveries that can unlock debilitating chronic diseases and develop new therapies,” said Richard N. Merkin, MD, president and CEO of Heritage Provider Network and The Merkin Family Foundation, and member of the Board of Overseers of the Keck School of Medicine of USC. The Heritage Provider Network and its affiliates operate in California, New York and Arizona, providing high-quality, cost-effective health care to more than 700,000 individuals.

“A slice of adult mouse brain containing neural stem cells and newborn neurons

– Richard N. Merkin, MD

Richard Merkin, MD