Wife Mother Advocate Philanthropist Ambassador Teacher

2008 Alumna of the Year
A serious and candid conversation with Annette Whittemore ’74 (elementary education/special education), the founding director of the Whittemore Peterson Institute for Neuro-Immune Disease, and the Nevada Alumni Association 2008 Alumna of the Year.

Annette is an engaging and absorbing advocate for the development of a unique institute under construction at the University of Nevada School of Medicine. After graduating from the University nearly 25 years ago and offering the perfect supporting role for her husband, Annette has ventured into a passionate and tireless effort to bring to her University and community a special research facility, clinic for patient care, and partnership for educational development with the School of Medicine and Department of Microbiology and Immunology.

Melanie Robbins ’06 M.A. (English) caught up with Annette in July to talk about her recent award and her role in the development of the institute. “She is an example of a vibrant and committed leader who represents the best of giving back to the University of Nevada, Reno,” Robbins says. “Our interview was casual and serious at the same time. Her focus was fun, but sharpened when we talked about her vision for the private and public partnership taking place on our campus.”

— Harvey Whittemore ’74 (prelegal)
now called ME/CFS. Dubbed chronic fatigue syndrome by Americans in the early 1980s, it is now believed that this is the same disease that was well characterized in the 1960s in the United Kingdom, and is classified by the world health organization as a neurological disease. About five years ago, I expressed interest to my daughter’s doctor, Dr. Daniel Peterson, about getting involved. He introduced me to another concerned parent and together we founded the HHV-6 Foundation, named for a fairly new virus. This virus has been implicated in ME/CFS, multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, and encephalitis. I realized that supporting research alone was not going to bring about the changes that patients so badly needed. I wondered aloud why huge numbers of extremely sick people were struggling just to find doctors. Accurate information, diagnostic tests and effective treatments were still missing from this field and yet there didn’t seem to be a cohesive voice of authority. Our governmental health agencies were ignoring the seriousness of the situation and refusing to support badly needed research. I felt a sense of urgency, a desire to know the answers right away. I’ve learned good science doesn’t work that way. But everyone we are collaborating with is passionate about their work, about helping people, and excited to be a part of an amazing program that is really the first of its kind in the nation. To be a part of building something from the ground up is a gift and a privilege. I feel incredibly blessed to be able to work with such gifted scientists, doctors and community members.

**How is your family reacting to your new role?**

My family is very understanding. I’m not the same 24-hour-a-day mom that I used to be.
Todd ’05 (general studies) and Natalie Okeson ’05 (political science), Harvey ’74 (prelegal), Annette ’74 (elementary education/special education), Alicia and DJ, Scott, Andrea and Brian Goad. SITTING: Kristin, Bob ’47 (economics) and Chase.

Harvey and I have five wonderful adult children, and four precious grandchildren. When my children were young, I was lucky enough to be able to work at home, help in their schools, with their sports activities, and generally enjoy the time I had with them. Now they are sharing their extra time helping me. I probably wouldn’t have believed we could achieve these goals if it weren’t for the lessons I learned from my family, Harvey’s family and the examples exhibited by those at the Nevada Cancer Institute and the Ruvo Brain Institute.

My greatest inspiration and role model for the past 38 years has been my best friend and husband, Harvey. He’s never too busy, despite his enormous workload, to listen, advise, and even take on the role of best supporter. But the most important lesson I have learned from simply watching Harvey is the joy he gets from giving spontaneously and generously, of his time, his talents, advice and possessions. No matter how hard I try to improve, it always seems as though I can’t get close to his level of giving. His basic love for people and his belief, that “to whom much is given much is required” pretty much sums him up.

I always believed that this was a project that would ultimately be bigger than I could have dreamed. That seems to be coming true if I had known all the challenges beforehand, I might have been too frightened to begin. When you do something like this without a road map, you have to have blind faith that you’re doing the best that you can, because nobody else is, and as long as you remain focused, and reach out for help when you need it, it will all come together. It’s an amazing journey. But it really couldn’t happen without the wisdom and leadership of many others who also believe in this mission, especially Dr. Daniel Peterson, Dr. Judy Mikovits, President Milton Glick, Governor Kenny Guinn, Senator Bill Raggio and Senator Harry Reid. We also appreciate Governor Jim Gibbons’ continued support and all the legislative efforts to make this a reality.

What is the most important lesson you have learned?

Receiving a great education at the University of Nevada, Reno was a good beginning, but a love for learning should never end. The message that I’d like to leave with everyone is: Become involved with the University in ways that you enjoy. Attend sporting events, the theater, musical programs, art exhibits, and seminars, or give to special projects and scholarships because a strong University makes for a stronger community. I love coming back to this campus. Harvey and I met here, in Manzanita Hall about two weeks after starting our freshman year. I tell him that it was our destiny to meet here. That first year we became best friends, and we were married at the end of our junior year. Even with no money we still knew we would be fine. That’s because we both knew that we’d find jobs after college. But, I never imagined that one day I would be helping to create a medical research institute on that very same campus.