



Wife **Mother**  
**Advocate** Philanthropist  
Ambassador **Teacher**

2008 Alumna of the Year

# Annette Whittemore

*Annette Whittemore '74 (elementary education/special education)*

*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)

## **Nevada Silver & Blue: How did your special journey begin?**

Before I was born, my father was a rural doctor for small eastern Nevada communities of Pioche, Panaca and Caliente. He traveled night and day between those small towns taking care of every imaginable medical event, from delivering babies to surgery. After starting a busy practice in Las Vegas, he continued to see many of those patients, driving on weekends, because, as he would say, "They're too sick to come all the way to my office." Some of my fondest memories and greatest life's lessons would come from watching him selflessly and lovingly tend to his patients. At the end of his house call he would be paid with a crate full of peaches, a couple of apple pies or a few polished rocks from the Nevada desert. He was a physician; it was his life-long calling, not just his job. I knew that I wanted to live a life that included giving to others, and working at something that I completely loved. But I also knew that I wanted to have a large family similar to the one I grew up in. Both my parents were voracious readers and valued education, so my

siblings and I were naturally attracted to teaching. As a result, instead of going into medicine, most of us became educators.

## **Tell me about your early education and career?**

I graduated from the University of Nevada, Reno in 1974 and moved to Tempe, Ariz., while Harvey '74 (prelegal) attended law school. I began my career teaching children with special needs in a resource program. The following year, I was asked to start a self-contained classroom for children who had previously been institutionalized. It was the first year of a federal mandate requiring these children be taught in public school classrooms. I taught children who were autistic or had another medical diagnosis, severely learning-disabled children and kids who were abused and emotionally handicapped. Mine was the first such classroom in the school district. We developed a program called behavior modeling in which we filmed the students acting out a "best" behavior. Then we would let them watch their own movies. It was a powerful motivator for them to behave in positive ways. I believe my students were better

behaved than the kids in the regular classroom next door. I also learned a very good lesson from a painful experience in that setting as a teacher. One of our most important goals was to assimilate our students back into the regular classroom for at least an hour a day. I had a second-grader who I thought was ready for that transition. The teacher absolutely refused to take her. I actually cried after that IEP (individual educational program) meeting. It seemed so unfair to the child. At that point, we felt that it was in the child's best interest not to go into the other classroom. I learned that one of the most important roles of a special education teacher is to be a good ambassador between the student, the regular classroom teacher and the administration.

## **How does a special education teacher and mother of five become involved in building a medical institute for neuro-immune diseases?**

This project was born out of a deep concern for individuals like my daughter Andrea, who suffers from a disease that has too few answers. She has myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME)



Harvey '74 (prelegal) and Annette Whittemore '74 (elementary/special education) attend friend Jeff Gonda's wedding in January 1973—six months prior to their own wedding. 2ND PHOTO: While in college, Annette Whittemore '74 (elementary/special education) drove a Washoe County special education bus. Pictured are some of her students during a trip for McKinley Park School in 1972. 3RD PHOTO: Annette Whittemore '74 (elementary/special education) introduces the Whittemore Peterson Institute for Neuro-Immune Disease at a legislative event at the Nevada Governor's Mansion. 4TH PHOTO: Annette Whittemore '74 (elementary/special education) with Landra Reid and Sen. Harry Reid during the 2007 "I Hope You Dance" fundraiser at which Reid was honored.

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 thought I had to do something to try to change things. A small group of us had been asked to support a much smaller center project at the University of Washington. After much deliberation, we decided to seek support for this project in Nevada, where we already had excellent re-

searchers, medical expertise, and a very large patient population. The idea grew to include a modern research facility.

### What is special about the Whittemore Peterson Institute?

The Whittemore Peterson Institute will be located within a larger project, the Center for Molecular Medicine, which will be the new home for many of the University's researchers. This facility will be located on the medical school campus in Reno to allow for a greater exchange of information between molecular scientists in the lab, and physicians and patients in the medical clinic. This center, an \$80 million project, is being funded from combined money that includes private, state and federal resources. But the largest share is from the full cost recovery of research grants made available to the University by the legislature in 2005. This facility will open in 2010 and will provide a home for translational research—that is research that turns scientific discoveries into practical applications to improve human health. Working closely with the medical school will also allow us to support medical education of future doctors and serve the community through outreach activities. One of our greatest challenges is to educate the greater community about the serious nature of these diseases.

They are systemic, progressive and most often disabling, like MS, lupus and diabetes can be, but unlike those diseases, people with ME/CFS, fibromyalgia, and atypical MS, don't have effective treatment options.

The exciting news is that we aren't waiting for the building to open to begin making progress. Our researchers are already forging ahead in the laboratory on campus, collaborating with top scientists at other institutions and writing grants to bring new resources into our University. It's a great way to build both the research program and support education while helping our community. I feel 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 '74 (prelegal) and Annette Whittemore '74 (elementary/special education) at their barn party at Lake Tahoe, with former Nevada Governor Kenny Guinn in the background.

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. **N**