



Whittemore family invests in neuro-immune institute

By Ken Kempcke

Annette '74 (elementary education/special education) and Harvey '74 (prelegal) Whittemore recently delivered \$1 million to President Milton Glick as part of a \$5 million pledge to augment the funding of construction of the Whittemore Peterson Institute for Neuro-Immune Disease within the University of Nevada School of Medicine's Center for Molecular Medicine. This institute is the first of its kind to combine basic research with evidenced-based patient care in a fully translational program.

The institute was first conceived when a group of dedicated citizens and clinicians proposed the concept of a medical institute in Nevada for the millions of patients in the United States suffering from neuro-immune diseases such as myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, atypical multiple sclerosis, autism and other related illnesses.

Although the number of Americans suffering from these disorders is growing, federally funded research has been sparse. Despite the seriousness of these illnesses, there are still no FDA-approved treatments or diagnostic tools that bring significant relief to patients. Scientists and clinicians at the Whittemore Peterson Institute hope to change that by building a bridge from the patient to the science, and back to the patient.

Dr. Daniel Peterson, medical director of the institute, is a pioneer in chronic fatigue syndrome research and a leading chronic fatigue syndrome clinician from Sierra Internal Medicine in Incline Village. He was one of the first doctors to recognize the illness in the United States, treating the famous Lake Tahoe cases of ME/chronic fatigue syndrome in the early 1980s. His paper on the Lake Tahoe outbreak has become a landmark in the understanding of these chronic and debilitating diseases. He is at the forefront of continued research

Annette Whittemore '74 with cancer researcher William Murphy in his lab with cellular and molecular biology grad students Danice Wilkins, Kory Alderson and Mark Hubbard.

seeking an understanding of the underlying causes of these diseases, while also educating the public about their serious nature.

"The fast growing numbers of individuals impacted by neuro-immune diseases and the lack of answers in this field of medicine make it imperative that we work together to support medical research and education," Peterson says. "I believe the University of Nevada, Reno and the Whittemore Peterson Institute have a unique opportunity to become leaders in the field of neuro-immunology through this and other key partnerships."

Annette Whittemore, founding director of the institute, praises Dr. Judy Mikovitz, the newly hired research director, who moved to Reno after years of working at the National Institutes of Health as a virologist studying the relationship of viruses to cancer: "Dr. Mikovitz is a world-class researcher. She immediately recognized the value of collaboration with the University's much larger

research community in finding answers for these chronic diseases.”

In addition to their support for the construction of the Whittemore Peterson Institute, the Reno-based Whittemore Family Foundation recently provided a \$100,000 gift to support the work of William Murphy, chair of the Department of Microbiology and Immunology in the School of Medicine. Murphy is a nationally recognized cancer researcher whose research is focused on examining issues in bone marrow transplantation and using the body’s immune system to “seek out and destroy—like a guided missile—pockets of cancer,” Murphy explains.

Mikovitz notes: “Many of the issues surrounding cancer and transplant science also apply to chronic inflammatory conditions like myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome, which are driven by a dysfunctional immune system. We believe someone with Dr. Murphy’s talent is critical to the success of our work at the Whittemore Peterson Institute.”

Murphy also leads the School of Medicine’s Laboratory of Cancer Immunology. Prior to coming to Nevada in 2002, he worked at the National Institutes of Health for 12 years, and became the director of basic research at the National Cancer Institute in Frederick, Md.

The Laboratory of Cancer Immunology employs 16 people: undergraduates, graduate students, research assistant professors and technicians. They conduct pre-clinical research and then collaborate with cancer centers around the country that work directly

with patients to evaluate drugs in clinical trials.

Murphy says that local, private funding is critical because the National Institutes of Health budget has flat-lined or decreased in recent years. “This has created a crisis in the research community and hurt our ability to maintain the pace of discovery,” he says.

Discoveries can be dramatic. “There are some molecular targeting agents that are truly remarkable in the remissions they cause in cancer and these agents only came about after years and years of research,” Murphy says. “When you realize these drugs not only work on remission rates, but actually reduce suffering and improve quality of life, it’s really incredible what you get on the return for investment in biomedical research.”

“Within Nevada, when you have private, non-profit research centers like the Whittemore Peterson Institute, you see a natural connection with higher education,” Murphy notes. “Our collaboration will help bring resources that the University could not provide, and create true synergy. The departments within the medical school will be tremendously strengthened. Already the Whittemore Peterson Institute has purchased state-of-the-art equipment that we didn’t have before in Nevada. That’s particularly important because it makes us more competitive when we apply for grants.”

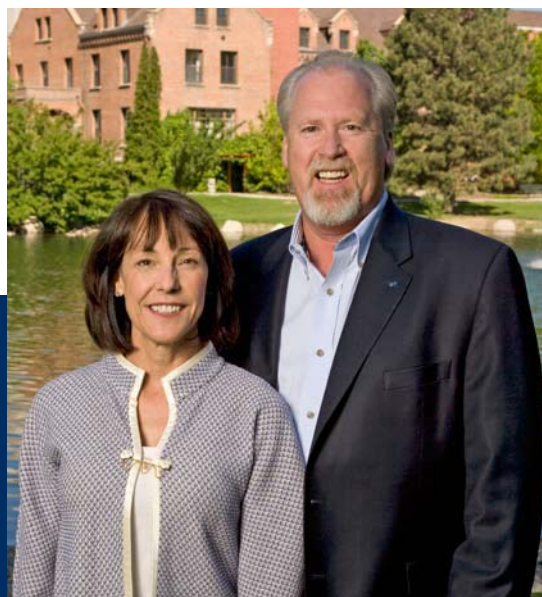
“We cannot afford to be islands,” Murphy adds. “With limited resources, we have to mobilize the community. What

we’re doing here has tremendous ramifications not just for Nevada citizens, but for anybody afflicted.”

Murphy says that dedicated citizens like Annette and Harvey Whittemore are critical to the University’s advancement. “Without private support, people take research for granted, and if you take research for granted, it goes away. I cannot compete at a national level unless we have the type of environment that encourages cutting-edge research.”

While the Whittemore Family Foundation plays a leading role in elevating education and biomedical research in Nevada, Murphy knows that investment decisions can be difficult.

“Research is not something where you get an immediate bang for your buck—you have to be patient. But construction of the Whittemore Peterson Institute and funding for cancer research are not only investments that fight disease, they’re investments that help the community because of their educational potential. Annette and Harvey have really stepped up to the plate to provide not only resources but also, importantly, a voice that makes our jobs as researchers a lot easier and new medical breakthroughs possible.” ■



Photos by Theresa Danna-Douglas

Whittemores give back to Nevada

Alumni Harvey '74 (prelegal) and Annette '74 (elementary education/special education) Whittemore are distinguished and loyal benefactors of the University of Nevada, Reno. In addition to their gift to the Whittemore Peterson Institute and William Murphy’s research, they have given generously to support numerous University facilities and programs including the Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center, the Foundation Annual Banquet, the Robert G. and Leslie H. Whittemore Scholarship Endowment, the Silver & Blue Society, the College of Liberal Arts, the College of Education and Wolf Pack Athletics.