Rebels with a Cause raises $3.6 million for USC cancer research

By Imelda Valenzuela Fowler

A media titan and a Nobel Laureate were honored, two music icons performed, an Emmy and Golden Globe award-winning comedian emceed and over $3.6 million was raised at the recent Rebels with a Cause: Visionaries and Revolutionaries Transforming Cancer Research gala.

The event was held on Sept. 19 in support of the lifesaving research and clinical care of David B. Agus, director of the USC Westside Cancer Center and the USC Center for Applied Molecular Medicine.

Rebels with a Cause was named in honor of actor Dennis Hopper, a former Agus patient who appeared in the motion picture of a similar name. Hopper died in May 2010 of prostate cancer.

“Dennis Hopper was one of my inspirational heroes,” said Agus. “Obviously Rebels with a Cause is something we truly believe in. Dennis was like the people we are honoring tonight, on the frontier fighting against cancer, and in my mind, they are all rebels.”

Sumner M. Redstone, executive chairman of Viacom and CBS Corporation, and Nobel Laureate Murray Gell-Mann, presidential professor of physics and medicine at USC, were both honored as the first “rebels” at the inaugural fundraiser held at the Four Seasons Los Angeles at Beverly Hills. Redstone has donated over $27 million toward Agus’ research and clinic at USC.

“When I say David is ahead of his time, quite seriously it’s because he knows and understands the future of medicine,” said Carmen A. Puliafito, dean of the Keck School of Medicine of USC. He added, “The contributions he has made, is making and will make in cancer research and treatment are inspirational in their own right. But they are also inspiring the next generation of young scientists and clinicians to ensure the future success of both fundamental and applied research.”

The gala featured special guest performances by Tony Bennett and Neil Young, actress and comedian Tracey Ullman, whose husband is a patient of Agus, served as emcee.

“David gave us a psychological boost,” said Ullman. “He always treats my husband with respect, and he’s mindful of his pride and dignity,” she said amid tears.

USC scientists receive NIH support for important, little-explored cancer research

By Robin Hoffler

Three USC researchers—representing medicine, chemistry and chemical engineering—are recipients of highly competitive grants from the National Institutes of Health’s Provocative Questions Project. USC, while the third went to researchers from the USC Viterbi School of Engineering and the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences.

For a study to be titled “Epigenetic Drivers of Cancer,” Peter Laird, director of the USC Epigenome Center and professor of surgery, biochemistry and molecular biology at the Keck School, submitted a query that led to an award of more than $2.38 million over four years.

In contrast to the traditional focus on mutations in the DNA, this grant will enable us to pursue an understanding of the less-often studied epigenetic changes in gene activity—changes in how the cell interprets the DNA, Laird said. “My question is: Can we distinguish between ‘driver’ and ‘passenger’ genetic events that lead to cancer?

If we’re able to do that, then we can identify which genes actually help to cause the cancer and develop drugs that attack that defect in the cell.”

Joining him as principal investigators of the study are Peter Jones, the Sawyer Chair in Cancer Research and a distinguished professor of
By Amy E. Hamaker

Guests gathered at the annual USC Alumni Association Volunteer Recognition Awards Dinner on Sept. 21 to recognize the volunteers who keep USC running.

The event honored volunteers from alumni clubs and organizations with affiliations throughout the university for their dedication and service to USC.

There were two honorees this year from the Health Sciences campus: Salerni Collegium Alumni Association (SCAA), home to Keck School of Medicine of USC alumni, resident alumni, faculty, parents and friends, was the recipient of a Volunteer Organization of the Year Award.

Dolly Harris, a volunteer with the USC Alumni Board of Governors and the USC School of Pharmacy Alumni Association, was honored with a President's Award.

Leadership from the Keck School and Salerni Collegium were present at the dinner, including Keck School Dean Carmen A. Puliafito, John Shibata, professor of pathology in the Keck School who received more than $220,000 to study "How do NSAIDs [nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs] Prevent Colorectal Cancer?"

Shibata said that several epidemiological studies have shown that people who take low-dose aspirin for heart health for at least five years, their risk of colon cancer goes down by 10 to 20 percent. "But no one knows why," Shibata said. "I'm going to test aspirin and another NSAIId, sulindac, which is sometimes used as a pain reliever, to try to find out how NSAIDs reduce cancer risks."

Shibata is interested in the stem cells from which cancer develops. "The theory, which I will explore, is that aspirin might reduce the number of stem cells we have in our bodies," he said. "It's only recently that we've been able to count the number of cancer stem cells in mice. It turns out that the colon has many stem cells in it. So, if we could reduce the number with some low-dose aspirin, then we might be able to reduce the risk of colon cancer."

The third USC project funded by the NCI seeks to answer the question, "Are there new technologies to inhibit traditionally 'undruggable' target molecules, such as transcription factors, that are required for the oncoenic phenotype?"

In this study, three principal investigators were awarded more than $472,000 to explore whether tumor cells that express certain proteins, and do not respond to standard drugs currently used to fight cancer, can be stopped or prevented with new types of drugs that would block the actions of those proteins.

The study’s researchers include Richard Roberts, professor of chemistry and chemical engineering in the Viterbi School and Dornsife College; Tierry Takahashi, research assistant professor of chemistry in the Dornsife College; and Pin Wang, associate professor of chemical engineering and materials science in the Viterbi School.

A departure from the NCI’s traditional grant-making process, the Provocative Questions Project asks for research proposals to address 24 critical questions that, if answered, could “substantially change the way that scientists approach cancer research.” In response, the NCI received more than 700 grant applications.

The Good Neighbors Campaign, which kicked off on Oct. 1, is coming to a close at the end of the month.

The campaign collects donations from USC staff, faculty and friends to promote better health and educational opportunities in the areas surrounding both the Health Sciences and University Park campuses.

Organizers are hoping at least 50 percent of USC’s faculty and staff will participate to help achieve this year’s goal of raising $1.6 million. Last year, nearly 6,000 people affiliated with USC contributed, raising over $1.5 million.

Of the programs that received funds last year, a dozen were health care-related initiatives including the USC Neighborhood Mobile Dental Clinic, the Engineering for Health Academy, Science for Life, HSC Health and Science Expo, USC Physical Therapy Fit Families Program, the USC Med-COR program, and the HSC Community Health and Wellness Fair.

Though the official campaign ends at the end of October, it is still possible to contribute to the Good Neighbors through the end of the year by visiting https://giving.usc.edu/goodneighbors/Donation/Give.

NIH: Grants allow USC researchers to explore unanswered, but important, cancer questions

Continued from Page 1

ology and biochemistry and molecular biology at the Keck School, and Stephen Baylin, professor of molecular biology at the Keck School and Salerni Collegium Board of Directors; Robert Beltran, member of the Salerni Collegium Board of Directors; Michele Cannis, president of the Salerni Collegium Board of Directors; and Kenneth Geller, vice president of the Salerni Collegium Board of Directors. Established in 1958, Salerni Collegium has evolved into one of the largest medical support and networking groups in the nation. The organization provides scholarships for medical students, funds student programming and offers access to the alumni online community KeaLNex.

Volunteer Organization of the Year Awards are given to USC alumni organizations or clubs in recognition of extraordinary efforts to engage USC alumni lifelong and worldwide and build a culture of philanthropy among the Trojan Family. The President’s Award is given to individuals in recognition of their extraordinary leadership, service, achievement and overall contributions to USC.
 USC study uncovers molecular components of healthy immune system

**By Hope Hamasidge**

Students from the public health program at the Keck School of Medicine of USC are looking for USC undergraduates to help out with a community health project.

**SunSmart**, which is a collaboration between USC undergraduates involved in the Joint Educational Project (JEP) and students in the Master of Public Health program at the Keck School, educates nearby elementary school children about the danger of too much exposure to the sun.

The program was conceived by Myles Cockburn, associate professor of preventive medicine at the Keck School, who said there is evidence that kids in Southern California are at heightened risk for developing skin cancer later in life.

One troubling fact that concerns public health officials is the rise of melanoma rates in recent years among Californians. Melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, is associated with exposure to ultraviolet radiation from the sun and experiencing sunburns in childhood.

"In California, we’re seeing a troubling trend in an increased incidence of melanoma that can’t be explained by more accurate screening and diagnosis," said Cockburn. "And while still rare, the disease is becoming more common in Latinos, an important population for our outreach through SunSmart."

For more information, or to participate, contact (213) 740-1857 uschvc@gmail.com.

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**The Weekly NEWSMAKERS**

**An Oct. 22 article in The Tennessean quoted Natalie Strand, assistant professor of clinical anesthesiology at the Keck School, about how to correctly administer a spinal steroid in reference to the recent fungal meningitis outbreak.**

**An Oct. 22 article in the Los Angeles Times quoted Philippe Friedlich, associate professor of clinical pediatrics at the Keck School, who said that the heart/lung bypass machines at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles have supported 1,004 patients with childhood leukemia.**

**An Oct. 22 story on Phys.org featured research by Randall Wetzel, professor of anesthesiology and pediatrics at the Keck School, and colleagues at the University of California, Riverside, that mines data from pediatric intensive care units to help doctors treat children and c/o health care costs.**

**An Oct. 21 report in Food Consumer cited a study by Frank Stanczyk, professor of research in obstetrics and gynecology at the Keck School, and colleagues about using synthetic hormones to treat menopausal symptoms.**

**An Oct. 20 story in the Pasadena Sun stated that Children’s Hospital of Los Angeles is one of America’s premier teaching hospitals through its longtime affiliation with the Keck School of Medicine.**

**An Oct. 19 report in Global News (Canada) covered research by Keck School of Medicine doctoral student Chelsea Catsburg and colleagues, finding that red meat consumption can increase the risk of bladder cancer.**

**An Oct. 15 broadcast on ABC News Los Angeles affiliate KCAL-TV interviewed Jeffrey Upperman, associate professor of pediatric surgery at the Keck School, about children being struck by cars due to being distracted while walking.**

**An Oct. 22 article by the California Healthcare Foundation featured research led by Prof. Pannabeck about school-age children spreading the flu.**

**An Oct. 22 report in Science Codex featured research by Edy Soffer, professor of clinical medicine at the Keck School, and colleagues that looks at the promise of electrical stimulation treatment for unresolved reflux symptoms.**

**An Oct. 18 column in The Washington Post featured research by Keck School research assistant Suzanne Houston and Elizabeth Sowell, professor of pediatrics at the Keck School, regarding studies on how parental education and economic status affect the development of children’s brains. Subjects with higher education had larger hippocampal regions, which process learning and memory; those with lower education or income had larger amygdalas, in which stress is processed.**

**On Oct. 17, Fortune ran an op-ed by David Agus, professor of medicine at the Keck School, about health-conscious laws. While New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s decision to limit trans fats in the city drew criticism, Agus wrote that researchers found the legislation significantly reduced trans fat consumption, affecting high- and low-income residents equally. “We know where we can reduce our risk for some disease by controlling certain agents of illness,” Agus said.**

**An Oct. 16 story by ABC News interviewed Francine Kaufman, professor emerita of pediatrics at the Keck School, about a study finding that sleep deprivation can lead to weight gain.**
By Beth Dunham

The Ostrow School of Dentistry of USC has launched a new online program aimed at busy practicing dentists who want to enhance their competency in treating geriatric patients.

The Online Master of Science in Geriatric Dentistry, a three-year program, uses weekly videoconferences, online lectures and quizzes, a research project and short year-round visits to campus to give dentists a deeper understanding of the oral health needs of older adults—while they continue their dental practices.

“This program is for the motivated general dentist who’d like to improve his or her skills in caring for older adults,” said Roseann Mulligan, program director and chair of the Division of Dental Public Health and Pediatric Dentistry at the Ostrow School. “It will focus on the most common medical and oral health conditions seen in older adults and their treatments, as well as cognitive changes, mental disorders and social factors that will impact their care.”

Ostrow School launches new online program

In case of an emergency...

Call the Emergency Information Phone: (213) 740-9323 The emergency telephone system can handle 1,400 simultaneous calls. It also has a backup system on the East Coast.

Visit the USC Web: http://emergency.usc.edu This page will be activated in case of an emergency. Backup Web servers on the East Coast will function if the USC servers are incapacitated.