

UT Southwestern Medical Center

In Memoriam: Peter O'Donnell Jr.

October 11, 2021

To the UT Southwestern community:

It is with profound sadness that we have learned of the passing of Peter O'Donnell Jr., whose vision, legendary generosity, and cherished friendship graced UT Southwestern Medical Center for many decades.

Throughout a lifetime of inspired philanthropy, Mr. O'Donnell and his late wife, Edith, along with the O'Donnell Foundation they established in 1957, contributed more than \$300 million to UT Southwestern, supporting some of the most innovative and impactful programs at the Medical Center. The O'Donnells' gifts to UT Southwestern, almost always made anonymously and without public recognition at the time, transformed the Medical Center into an internationally recognized research leader.

As Chairman of the O'Donnell Foundation, Mr. O'Donnell committed himself to developing and funding model programs designed to strengthen education, research, and clinical care. Mr. O'Donnell helped foster an environment of innovation and discovery at UT Southwestern that has enabled transformative progress in biomedical research. As we mourn the passing of one of UT Southwestern's most stalwart supporters, we are grateful to have had the opportunity to publicly recognize Mr. O'Donnell's magnificent generosity for the first time in 2015 through the naming of the Peter O'Donnell Jr. Brain Institute at UT Southwestern.

Recognizing brain injury in its various forms as one of the greatest challenges of our time, Mr. O'Donnell committed \$36 million to create a new institute dedicated to unraveling the mysteries of the brain – from the molecular level of brain function to the root causes of diseases and damage that occur with such conditions as traumatic brain injury and Alzheimer's.

The establishment of the O'Donnell Brain Institute was the capstone of a remarkable 40-year partnership between Mr. O'Donnell and UT Southwestern, which was set in motion in 1981 when he founded Friends of the Center for Human Nutrition. His investments in the Center for more than three decades enabled UT Southwestern investigators to make key discoveries that have expanded our understanding of the role nutrition plays in the prevention and treatment of chronic conditions such as heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and cancer.

He made significant contributions to support research in the Department of Molecular Genetics focused on cholesterol, metabolism, diabetes, and obesity. This support helped propel the work of Nobel

Laureates Michael Brown, M.D., and Joseph Goldstein, M.D., whose research served as a foundation for the development of statin drugs now used to control cholesterol in tens of millions of people around the globe. He also helped UT Southwestern recruit, retain, and support the work of some of the most brilliant minds in biomedical research, including Nobel Laureate Bruce Beutler, M.D., who has advanced medical science's collective understanding of the genetics of the immune system.

Mr. O'Donnell was committed to supporting early career medical researchers who represent the future of science and medicine. He provided a challenge grant in 1997 to UT Southwestern that was the impetus for the Endowed Scholars Program in Medical Science. Armed with the knowledge that more than half of all scientists awarded the Nobel Prize began their work under the guidance of current Nobel Laureates, Mr. O'Donnell worked to ensure that UT Southwestern would stand apart from other institutions in the nurturing of scientific protégés. To encourage the careers of scientists and engineers more broadly across the state of Texas, he established the annual Edith and Peter O'Donnell Awards, presented by The Academy of Medicine, Engineering & Science of Texas (TAMEST), to honor and help fund outstanding early career researchers in science, medicine, and engineering. Continuing his commitment to support the best and brightest researchers, in July 2014 Mr. O'Donnell further invested in rising stars with a gift to propel clinical innovation in cancer by establishing the Eugene P. Frenkel, M.D., Clinical Scholars Program.

Although Mr. O'Donnell's impact on UT Southwestern was most expansive in advancing its research programs, his efforts extended to all dimensions of our mission. It was his challenge and support that led UT Southwestern to be among the first institutions to implement an electronic medical record for both inpatient and outpatient care.

While Mr. O'Donnell has left an especially indelible imprint on UT Southwestern, he and Edith have also left a legacy at many other educational and civic organizations across our region, our state, and our country. As but one example, his support of Advanced Placement programs in science across the state and the country, particularly in high schools serving students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, has promoted STEM education and opportunity that will undoubtedly have an impact that will be felt for generations to come.

The contributions cited here are just some of the many ways in which Peter O'Donnell, together with Edith, supported UT Southwestern. Excellence was a watchword for Mr. O'Donnell in everything he did and touched. He was a giant of our institution and a quiet driving force in advancing medical science. With his determination to stay out of the spotlight, the full extent of Mr. O'Donnell's impact on society is likely not known by many of those who have benefited from his vision and generosity. He touched legions with compassion, an uncommon generosity, and an earnest love of mankind. The scope and depth of ways in which he advanced the work of the Medical Center is truly remarkable. He will be deeply missed.

Daniel K. Podolsky, M.D.
President
UT Southwestern Medical Center