

# Momentum Newsletter: Winter 2022

From returning to a full roster of in-person events to commemorating 25 years of progress towards a cure, the year has filled us with hope and gratitude. It is thanks to our community and your unwavering support that we can celebrate research advancements, improved patient care and support for all those facing pancreatic cancer. This year, we renew our passion to find a cure and are filled with gratitude for the robust community that supports us.

## 25 Years of Progress

We have spent much of this year reflecting on the progress we have made over the past 25 year. As we look towards the future, our motto guides the path ahead: “Never Give Up! Finding a cure is worth fight for!” It is thanks to the support of our community that we have fulfilled four of our five mission pillars and have made tangible improvements for patients and families. While our journey towards a cure continues, it is with hope and gratitude that we look toward a cancer-free future for all.

[Learn more about our 25 years →](#)

## A New Roster of Seed Grants Brings Promise

Our commitment to fund innovative pancreatic cancer research continues with a new roster of Seed Grant Awardees. These eight

outstanding projects range from investigating how a digestive enzyme could be used as an early detection screening tool, to better understanding the immune systems of long-term survivors for clues to help with treatment, to targeting iron to create an anti-tumor response. These impressive researchers will deepen our knowledge of pancreatic cancer, create new treatment avenues, and improve patient outcomes. We are optimistic for the advances that will come from these bright minds!

[Read About Our Seed Grant Awardees →](#)

## **Our Partnership with the APA**

Each November, we begin Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month at the American Pancreatic Association (APA) meeting. The annual APA meeting brings together an international group of scientists and clinicians to identify the best course of treatment and discuss the most up- to-date research results for pancreatic diseases. The Hirshberg Opening Symposium at the APA meeting has allowed us to bring crucial topics such as the importance of nutrition and psychosocial care to an international stage. Our longstanding relationship with the APA has helped foster the scientific research needed to drive us towards a cure for pancreatic cancer and improve patient outcomes across the globe.

[Learn more about the APA →](#)

## **25th LA Cancer Challenge 5K Walk/Run held at UCLA**

Our 25th walk/run was held on the beautiful campus of UCLA where we celebrated 25 years of progress and patient care! The LA Cancer Challenge was filled with warm embraces, incredible

milestones and the joy of working to make a difference for our pancreatic cancer community. To date, the LACC has raised over \$10.1 million for pancreatic cancer research and programs. Thank you to all our walkers, runners, donors, volunteers, and sponsors who reminded us to “Never Give Up: Let’s Fight to the Finish!”

[Support our LACC participants →](#)

## Training is Underway for the 2023 LA Marathon

The Hirshberg Training Team offers an exciting fitness challenge for runners of all levels (couch-potatoes included) who are passionate about the pancreatic cancer community. With the Hirshberg Training Team you get personalized training, one-on-one access to our amazing coaches who have helped thousands cross the finish line, a pre-race luxury suite (with clean, warm bathrooms) and a post-race celebration dinner. Running a marathon is an extraordinary achievement; running to fight pancreatic cancer is life changing.

[Join the Hirshberg Training Team →](#)

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## 25 Years of Progress

For 25 years, the Hirshberg Foundation has set out to fulfill our five mission pillars; each represents a critical milestone that has had a ripple effect for patients and families around the world. Thanks to our fundraising efforts, community

participation and generous donors, our hard work has resulted in extraordinary scientific discoveries and patient programs that help guide survivors. To date, we have committed millions of dollars to pancreatic cancer research and have seen improved treatments, outcomes, and quality of life for patients. One final piece of the puzzle remains: **finding a cure**. We celebrate 25 years of progress as our mantra guides the path ahead: “Never Give Up! Finding a Cure is Worth Fighting for.”

## Pillar 1:

To create a premier Pancreatic Cancer Center where all needs of pancreatic cancer patients can be met in one location with the most advanced treatment options.

We have made this a reality through our UCLA Labs and the UCLA Agi Hirshberg Center for Pancreatic Cancer Diseases. Comprised of 3 laboratories, tissue bank and an Integrated Practice Unit where patients are seen by a team of experts united in their care, our UCLA Center has influenced pancreas-focused institutions across the globe.

[Watch more about the UCLA Labs →](#)

## Pillar 2:

To fund projects and programs designed to improve patient care, treatment and, ultimately, pancreatic cancer survival rates.

Through our Seed Grant program, the UC Pancreatic Cancer Consortium (UCPCC), our relationship with the [American Pancreatic Association \(APA\)](#), and an emphasis on collaboration, we have seen survival rates improve.

Our Seed Grant program funds innovative research in its early stages and has resulted in over \$130 million in National

Institutes of Health (NIH) funding. The UCPCC brings together 5 cancer centers to share their work and collaborate towards a cure. The annual APA meeting brings together an international group of scientists and clinicians to identify the best course of treatment and discuss the most up-to-date research results for pancreatic diseases. These partnerships are helping to accelerate the progress and impact of the research being done while translating that research into improved patient care.

[Learn more about the UCPCC →](#)

[Watch more about our partnership with the APA →](#)

[See our 2022-2023 Seed Grant Awardees →](#)

## **Pillar 3:**

To be recognized as a patient support reference source for pancreatic cancer patients and their families.

A cornerstone of the Hirshberg Foundation is helping patients and their families navigate a pancreatic cancer diagnosis. What began with Agi sharing her experiences with other families has evolved into a robust program that includes a dedicated Patient & Family Support Specialist, a wealth of online resources, our annual Symposium and more. Our relationships with doctors around the world mean that we can provide referrals and support, and that each call is answered by someone who has been through it. Our patient support program has always been a beacon of hope for patients and families facing this disease.

[Learn more about how we support patients & families →](#)

## Pillar 4:

To integrate and unite generations, young and old, through physical fitness participation, while creating public awareness and raising money to find a cure for pancreatic cancer.

In the spirit of Ron Hirshberg, our fundraising events have always centered around fitness activities for the whole family. After losing his father to pancreatic cancer, Jon Hirshberg began planning our first event, a 5K race to honor his father's memory. For the past 25 years, our fundraising events have given the pancreatic cancer community a chance to honor loved ones, celebrate and support survivors, and create awareness. Now, our three signature fundraising events, the LA Cancer Challenge, the Tour de Pier and the Hirshberg Training Team, have raised over \$20 million to date.

[Watch more about the LA Cancer Challenge, the event that started it all →](#)

## Pillar 5:

To find a cure for pancreatic cancer in honor of Ron Hirshberg and the thousands of people who are diagnosed with this disease each year.

The final pillar is yet to be accomplished, and we will not stop until our entire mission is complete. All of these accomplishments are steps towards our ultimate goal of finding a cure for pancreatic cancer. It is thanks to the support of our community that we commemorate 25 years of extraordinary scientific discoveries while providing support services for patients around the world.

[Join us and give today →](#)

[Watch more about our 25 years of progress →](#)

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# Honoring 25 Years Advancing Pancreatic-Cancer Research

Originally published in UCLA Health's [U Magazine](#)

Some of the most powerful changes in medicine have come about following a tragedy. In 1997, Ronald S. Hirshberg died from pancreatic cancer at the age of 54. That year, his wife, Agi Hirshberg, dedicated herself to advancing pancreatic-cancer research by establishing the Hirshberg Foundation for Pancreatic Cancer Research in memory of her late husband. As the first beneficiary of the foundation's giving, UCLA established the Ronald S. Hirshberg Translational Pancreatic Cancer Research Laboratory in 1998, and the Ronald S. Hirshberg Chair in Translational Pancreatic Cancer Research in 2000. The relationship was further solidified in 2015 following new philanthropic support from the Hirshberg Foundation, which launched the UCLA Agi Hirshberg Center for Pancreatic Diseases.

"The Hirshberg Foundation's generosity has helped elevate the UCLA Hirshberg Center to one of the nation's premier, comprehensive programs for pancreatic cancer and diseases," said Dr. O. Joe Hines (RES '97), director of the UCLA Agi Hirshberg Center for Pancreatic Diseases, interim chair of the Department of Surgery and Robert and Kelly Day Chair in General Surgery. "From the very beginning, Agi and her family and team at the foundation vowed to raise sorely needed funds for research to broaden treatment options and give hope to pancreatic-cancer patients. She continues to advocate for change and her dedication inspires physicians, researchers, patients and their families."

Twenty-five years ago, the Hirshberg Foundation was the only organization of its kind focused solely on finding a cure for this devastating disease. Since then, the partnership between UCLA and the Hirshberg Foundation has driven advances in the understanding and treatment of pancreatic cancer for the benefit of thousands of patients and their families. Through a wide range of activities, including fund raising, education, advocacy and patient support, this remarkable collaboration has opened the door to countless discoveries and shaped the future of pancreatic cancer treatment.

In 2022, the American Cancer Society reported an increase in the five-year survival rate for pancreatic cancer to 11%, up from 6% just 10 years ago. This tremendous progress speaks to the vision and determination of the Hirshberg Foundation to provide funding for high-impact investigations, and of the UCLA faculty who pursue innovative avenues of research.

The Hirshberg Foundation Seed Grant Program is one such area that has benefited from the foundation's funding. Directed by Dr. Vay Liang W. Go, Distinguished Professor of Medicine in the UCLA Vatche and Tamar Manoukian Division of Digestive Diseases and co-director of the UCLA Agi Hirshberg Center for Pancreatic Diseases, the program fosters leading-edge research on a global level by providing strategic investments in research that enable investigators to gather preliminary data that can then be used to apply for larger grants.

"Seed funding supports highly innovative research projects that are not usually funded by government agencies," said Dr. Go. "Agi understands this and is a valued partner in our work. Philanthropic support of this kind for early research is indispensable to investigations that have the potential to make a profound impact on this disease and create a roadmap toward

better treatments and, one day, a cure."

Since 2005, 104 seed grants have been awarded to 40 medical-research institutions in the United States and internationally, resulting in myriad discoveries and approximately \$130 million in National Institutes of Health funding. UCLA is a partner in administering these grants and about 30 UCLA research projects have benefited from this support through the years.

The foundation also has invested in the UCLA Pancreatic Tissue Bank, a vital resource for pancreatic disease researchers at UCLA and the wider scientific community; an annual symposium that brings together patients and families with leading researchers; and psychosocial support to those impacted by cancer and their families at no cost to patients at the Simms/Mann-UCLA Center for Integrative Oncology. The Hirshberg Foundation's 25th Annual LA Cancer Challenge 5K walk/run, which to date has raised more than \$10.1\* million mostly directed to UCLA for pancreatic cancer research, was held at UCLA in October.

***"Since establishing the foundation 25 years ago, we have been unwavering in our mission to be relentless in finding new ways to address and heal pancreatic cancer. Our partnership with UCLA has amplified our ability to move the needle in research and ways to help pancreatic cancer patients."***

"Since establishing the foundation 25 years ago, we have been unwavering in our mission to be relentless in finding new ways to address and heal pancreatic cancer," said Hirshberg. "Our partnership with UCLA has amplified our ability to move the needle in research and ways to help pancreatic cancer patients."

The special collaboration between UCLA and the Hirshberg Foundation for Pancreatic Cancer Research has laid the groundwork for a model in which the needs of people with

pancreatic cancer are met in one location with the most advanced treatment options available. In addition to accelerating the pace of medical discovery, the foundation also has raised awareness of the disease and supports patients and their families at all stages of treatment and survivorship by disseminating information and providing resources. Construction of a new, state-of-the-art home for the UCLA Hirshberg Center in the Vatche and Tamar Manoukian Medical Building is in progress.

"My husband, Ron, always thought a problem was an invitation: 'No' meant 'maybe' and 'maybe' meant 'yes.' It is with this strong determination that he battled cancer, and it is still the way the foundation will continue Ron's fight to win the battle against pancreatic cancer," said Hirshberg. "I know the crucial role philanthropy plays in fueling pioneering thinking and research and I am so proud of what the foundation's partnership with UCLA has accomplished. With our shared purpose, I am certain this is only the beginning of what we can do together."

*\*Originally published with the pre-25th LA Cancer Challenge figure of \$9.6 million*

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## **A Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month Tradition**

Reagan Ferris was just three years old when her father, Eric, passed away after a 2-year battle with pancreatic cancer at just 41 years old. Now a senior in high school, Reagan has grown up celebrating the holidays and milestones with her amazing mom, Jennifer and her two older brothers, Jackson and Carter, and

inevitably, she thinks about her dad.

Service to others has always been a cornerstone for the Ferris family. A few years ago, Reagan decided that [Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month](#) was the perfect time to do something on her own to help others. She created a [fundraiser with See's Candy](#) in honor of her dad, benefiting the Hirshberg Foundation. Reagan writes, "the Hirshberg Foundation and staff at UCLA were instrumental in helping my dad get the best care possible. Our family is forever grateful to everyone who helped my dad (healthcare workers, family, friends, colleagues, and even kind strangers) and those who continue to support our family and his memory."

She added, "I am blessed to do something special to honor my dad and all those who fight for and support this important cause. I hope to continue this tradition and to inspire others to find ways to give help where needed." To date, she has raised over \$4,400 and Reagan hopes to keep the tradition going.

As you prepare for the holidays, make them even sweeter with a gift that gives back – consider supporting Reagan and her See's Candy fundraiser.

[Reagan's See's Candy Fundraiser →](#)

[Donate to Reagan's Fund →](#)

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## President of UCLA Health named

# Honorary Medical Co-Chair at the 25th LA Cancer Challenge

It is a privilege to welcome Johnese Spisso, MPA, President of UCLA Health and CEO of the UCLA Hospital System to serve as the Honorary Medical Co-Chair at the 25th LA Cancer Challenge. As the Hirshberg Foundation and the LA Cancer Challenge commemorate 25 years of research progress and patient support for the pancreatic cancer community, we are appreciative of our deep partnership with UCLA Health.

Johnese Spisso joins [Dr. John Mazziotta](#), Vice Chancellor of UCLA Health Sciences and CEO of UCLA Health, to serve as co-chair for the LA Cancer Challenge. **This joint honor captures the holistic approach to patient support and research that have been tenets of the Hirshberg Foundation's partnership with UCLA.** Since 1997, the Hirshberg Foundation has emphasized patient care alongside research, investing in treatment that span the bench to the bedside. Today, the [Hirshberg Laboratories at UCLA](#) closely collaborate with the [UCLA Agi Hirshberg Center for Pancreatic Diseases](#), a center of excellence for patient treatment and care.

"It is an honor to have both Johnese and Dr. Mazziotta join us at the LA Cancer Challenge for our landmark year. Bringing together doctors and patients, families and healthcare leaders has been my dream. We are stronger when we work together and learn from each other's experiences," wrote Agi Hirshberg, Founder and President of the Hirshberg Foundation.

**As we commemorate 25 years, we celebrate our progress, our determination and our partnership with UCLA. We are proud to honor Johnese Spisso and Dr. John Mazziotta as they lead the [UCLA Health](#) team at the 25th LA Cancer Challenge.**

“Agi and the Hirshberg Foundation have been invaluable partners over the past 25 years. Serving as co-chair with Dr. Mazziotta is an honor and symbolizes the partnership between research and patient care that is a cornerstone of UCLA Health, and we couldn’t have done it without the support of the Hirshberg Foundation. I look forward to celebrating with the pancreatic cancer community on October 23, 2022,” said Johnese Spisso.

“The LACC allows our doctors to meet the families who are fundraising for a cure, lets the fundraisers cheer for the 3-, 5-, and 10-year survivors. It is a day of joy and some tears but most of all, a day of hope,” said Hirshberg. **Join Agi, Johnese, Dr. Mazziotta and the pancreatic cancer community at the [25th LA Cancer Challenge](#) on October 23rd at UCLA.**

[Johnese Spisso](#) assumed the position of President of UCLA Health, CEO of UCLA Hospital System and Associate Vice Chancellor of UCLA Health Sciences in 2016. She is a nationally recognized academic healthcare leader with more than 30 years of experience, and oversees all operations of UCLA’s hospitals and clinics as well as the health system’s regional outreach strategy.

Before coming to UCLA, Spisso spent 22 years at UW Medicine in Seattle, Washington, where she was promoted from Chief Nursing Officer to Chief Operating Officer to Chief Health System Officer and Vice President of Medical Affairs for the University of Washington. She served in the latter role from 2007-2016 and was responsible for the two academic medical centers, two community hospitals, the network of community clinics, and the Airlift Northwest flight program. While there, Spisso played a major role in expanding collaborations with regional hospitals and in the operational integration of two major community hospitals into UW Medicine. She also was instrumental in leading the development of a statewide trauma system.

Prior to UW, as a registered nurse, Spisso rose through the ranks over 12 years at the University of California, Davis Medical Center and directed the critical care, trauma and burn center, emergency services and the Life Flight Air-Medical Program. Before that, she began her career as a critical-care nurse in the medical, surgical and transplant intensive care unit at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Presbyterian.

Spisso received a master's degree in health care administration and public administration from the University of San Francisco, and a bachelor's degree in health sciences from Chapman College. She earned her RN at the St. Francis School of Nursing. She has published numerous articles and book chapters on healthcare leadership, and she serves on several national boards, including the American Association of Medical Colleges' Council of Teaching Hospitals and Health Systems.

Spisso is active in community leadership and has served as the Los Angeles Community Chair for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society Light the Night Walk as well as the Los Angeles Community Chair for the American Heart Association's Go Red for Women Luncheon. She has received numerous awards and recognition throughout her career, recently being named to Modern Healthcare's Top 25 Most Influential Women Leaders in 2019, LA Business Journal's 500 Most Influential Leaders in Los Angeles in 2020, Modern Healthcare's Top 50 Clinical Leaders of 2020 in the U.S., and the Los Angeles Business Journal Women of Influence Award for Health Care in 2021 and 2022.

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# The Hirshberg Laboratories at UCLA

As we commemorate 25 years of progress in the field of pancreatic cancer research, we take a moment to reflect on where we started. When the Hirshberg Foundation was established in 1997, it was organized around five mission pillars. To date, we have accomplished 4 of those 5 goals, with “a cure” being the final piece.

## One [mission](#) pillar is

*To create a premier Pancreatic Cancer Center where all needs of pancreatic cancer patients can be met in one location with the most advanced treatment options.*

The work of our UCLA Labs is bringing that goal to life. Learn more about the collaboration and progress happening at our UCLA laboratories.

[Watch Our UCLA Labs Video →](#)

Just a few months after [Ronnie](#) passed away from pancreatic cancer, Agi connected with the doctors who had treated him to establish a research program at UCLA. In February 1998, the Ronald S. [Hirshberg Translational Pancreatic Cancer Research Laboratory](#) was opened, the first lab dedicated solely to pancreatic cancer research. Shortly thereafter, the [Basic Research](#) chair was created and Dr. Enrique Rozengurt was appointed to this distinguished position. In 2019, with the recruitment of Dr. Miklos [Sahin-Toth](#), the Hirshberg research centers at UCLA grew to encompass three laboratories.

These three laboratories are located in the same building, with

two of the labs side-by-side to generate new ideas and foster collaboration. The research being done at these labs is also shared and directly applicable to patients being treated through the [UCLA Agi Hirshberg Center for Pancreatic Cancer Diseases](#). This deeply collaborative, integrated approach to holistic patient care was a dream in 1997. Thanks to the tireless efforts of researchers, donors, physicians, families, supporters and entire extended network of Hirshberg Foundation family, this dream is now a world-renowned reality.

The mission pillar of a “premier pancreatic cancer center” has guided our work. The progress that has been made through research at the UCLA Labs has influenced pancreas-focused institutions across the globe, and has driven research towards a cure. After 25 years of milestones, we are more committed than ever to our motto “Never Give Up: Finding a Cure is Worth Fighting For.”