

Honoring 25 Years Advancing Pancreatic-Cancer Research

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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."

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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*

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 →](#)

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.

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.”

Vice Chancellor of UCLA Health Sciences to serve as Honorary Medical Chair at the 25th LA Cancer Challenge

As the Hirshberg Foundation and the LA Cancer Challenge commemorate 25 years of advancing research and providing patient services for the pancreatic cancer community, we are grateful to partner with UCLA Health and welcome Dr. John C. Mazziotta as our Honorary Medical Chair.

When the Hirshberg Foundation was [established in July of 1997](#), it was in partnership with doctors and researchers at UCLA. The Ronald S. [Hirshberg Translational Pancreatic Cancer Research Laboratory](#) was opened shortly thereafter in February 1998. The Hirshberg research centers at UCLA have grown to include three laboratories that collaborate amongst each other and with the [UCLA Agi Hirshberg Center for Pancreatic Cancer Diseases](#). **This deep partnership with UCLA is why it is such a distinct honor to recognize Dr. John Mazziotta and have him leading the [UCLA Health](#) team at the 25th LA Cancer Challenge.**

“I look forward to marking 25 years of fighting towards a cure with my friend Dr. Mazziotta by our side. It is an honor to have him participating in the LA Cancer Challenge,” said Agi Hirshberg, Founder and President of the Hirshberg Foundation.

In reply to our invitation, Dr. Mazziotta wrote, “I have long admired and commend the work of the Hirshberg Foundation. Their partnership has helped establish UCLA as a premiere pancreatic cancer center and we are deeply grateful for their longstanding support. It is a true privilege to be the Honorary Medical Chair for this landmark year of the LA Cancer Challenge. I look forward to leading our UCLA Health team, see you there!”

“We have made such progress and I am confident that our momentum and hard work will carry us to the finish: a cure! I have happy tears just thinking about all the hugs and faces I will see at this year’s event,” said Agi Hirshberg. **Join Agi, Dr. Mazziotta and the pancreatic cancer community at the [25th LA Cancer Challenge](#) on October 23rd at UCLA.**

[Dr. John C. Mazziotta](#) has been Vice Chancellor of UCLA Health Sciences and CEO of UCLA Health since 2015. A member of the David Geffen School of Medicine faculty since 1983, Dr. Mazziotta also has served as Dean of the medical school,

Associate Vice Chancellor of UCLA Health Sciences and Executive Vice Dean. In addition, he was chair of the Department of Neurology and founding director of the Ahmanson-Lovelace Brain Mapping Center.

Dr. Mazziotta earned his MD and PhD in neuroanatomy and computer science from Georgetown University. Following an internship at Georgetown, he completed neurology and nuclear medicine training at UCLA.

Dr. Mazziotta has published more than 260 research papers and eight texts. He has received numerous awards and honors, including the Oldendorf Award from the American Society of Neuroimaging, the S. Weir Mitchell Award and the Wartenberg Prize of the American Academy of Neurology, and the Von Hevesy Prize from the International Society of Nuclear Medicine. Dr. Mazziotta has been elected to the National Academy of Medicine and the Royal College of Physicians.

Momentum Newsletter: Summer 2022

This summer is filled with optimism as the Hirshberg Foundation commemorates 25 years of making progress towards a cure. We know that there is still work to be done. However, we must pause to acknowledge the advancements that have been made, to honor the lives we have lost, and to redouble our efforts to support those families faced with a pancreatic cancer diagnosis. This summer we celebrate 25 years of providing our community with hope, and we invigorate our efforts towards a cure!

25 Years of Progress

This summer marks [25 years](#) of our relentless pursuit of a cure for pancreatic cancer. As we reflect on the milestones we have achieved, our 25th anniversary motto guides the path ahead: “Never Give Up! Our journey continues with an end in sight.” In 1997, just months after Ron Hirshberg passed away, Agi and her family created the five pillars of the Hirshberg Foundation’s mission. To date, we have accomplished 4 of those 5 goals, with a cure being the last pillar left to attain. Over the next few months, we will be sharing the milestones we have accomplished thanks to your support. Learn more about our 25th Anniversary with our video and join us in never giving up!

[Watch Video →](#)

UCLA Activity Summary Report

A pillar of our [mission statement](#) is to create a premier pancreatic cancer center where the needs of patients can be met in one place. That goal is a reality at the [UCLA Agi Hirshberg Center for Pancreatic Diseases](#). Our longstanding partnership with UCLA is working to develop and disseminate the most advanced treatment options, not only to patients at UCLA but across the country. These efforts include the [UC Pancreatic Cancer Consortium](#) (UCPCC) which unites 5 UC campuses in order to accelerate progress; new clinical trials at UCLA; our [Tissue Bank](#) that provides assistance and collaboration across the globe; and our renowned psychosocial care through the [Simms/Mann Center for Integrative Oncology](#). Our latest UCLA Activity Summary Report highlights the work from our flagship center as well as the collaborations taking place to expand excellence in care to all pancreatic cancer patients.

[Read the Report →](#)

Latest News & Research

This year has been filled with exciting news. The UCLA Hirshberg Center was recently recognized as a Clinical and Academic Center of Excellence for Pancreatitis and Pancreatic Cancer by the National Pancreas Foundation, a [prestigious designation](#) that speaks to the outstanding, holistic care being provided. It is an accomplishment for the entire UCLA team and a marker of the progress we are making. The [UC Pancreatic Cancer Consortium](#) has connected researchers at UC Davis, UC San Francisco, UCLA, UC Irvine, and UC San Diego to collaborate on research and clinical trials to accelerate the treatment options available to patients. Three of the UCs in the UCPCCC have also been awarded grants from [Canopy Cancer Collective](#) to help improve the outcomes and well-being for all patients with pancreatic cancer. This grant will support the UCLA Hirshberg Center in expanding the exceptional level of care to all UCLA Health facilities, which extend from San Luis Obispo to Laguna Beach, CA.

[Support these outstanding updates →](#)

The 25th LA Cancer Challenge 5K is October 23, 2022

Not only is it the 25th Anniversary for the Hirshberg Foundation, it is the [25th Annual LA Cancer Challenge](#) 5K Walk/Run. The LACC is the event that started it all and encompasses our mission pillar to “unite generations, young and old, through physical fitness to raise awareness for pancreatic cancer.” The LACC began as a way to make a difference as a

community, and thanks to the tireless support from our participants, teams, volunteers and sponsors, we've made great strides towards a cure. Join us [in-person](#) at UCLA or [virtually](#) from wherever you are, and know that your participation helps make our accomplishments possible. In our 25th year it's more important than ever to for us to "Never Give Up! Let's Fight to the Finish!"

[Register Today →](#)