



MENDEZ NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF  
TRANSPLANTATION FOUNDATION

ANNUAL MAGAZINE 2024

*Building on the*  
**LEGACY**





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# LETTER FROM THE *Executive Director*

Dear friends,

As we reflect on an impactful year at the Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation (MNITF), I'm reminded of the extraordinary legacy of my father, Dr. Rafael Mendez, and my uncle, Dr. Robert Mendez, whose pioneering spirit in kidney health and transplantation has guided us since the beginning. With the recent passing of Dr. Robert Mendez, we are entering a new chapter without our founders but remain steadfast in carrying their vision forward. In fact, this year has brought some of our most significant achievements yet, thanks to the enduring inspiration of their work and the dedication of our partners, supporters, and team.



In this year's magazine, you'll find updates on our latest projects, partnerships, and achievements. You'll get to read about our 2024 Research Grant Program (RGP) recipients and the vital work being supported by MNITF's grants, which have now surpassed \$4 million in total funding since the RGP's inception. You'll also be introduced to *The Christmas Chain*, MNITF's first feature film, which has already garnered awards at film festivals nationwide and brings awareness to the importance of kidney health and donation.

Our outreach continues with powerful social media campaigns that build on the success of our edutainment series, *Linked by Love*. We're also thrilled to share that *Linked by Love* is set for release on streaming platforms in February 2025—stay tuned for more updates on this exciting development! Just in time for the holiday season, we're sharing a delicious kidney-friendly recipe sure to bring joy to your table while supporting kidney health, along with expert insights from nephrologist Dr. Vincent Anthony on managing hypertension, a leading cause of kidney disease.

A core focus this year has been community partnerships, particularly our collaboration with the Texas Kidney Foundation, as we work to expand resources for underserved communities affected by kidney disease. These initiatives, projects, and partnerships reflect MNITF's ongoing commitment to the mission and legacy my father and uncle established.

As we close this year, I sincerely thank each of you for your continued support.

Together, we are working toward a future where kidney disease awareness is prioritized, transplantation science continues to advance, and patient empowerment remains at the forefront of medical progress.

Warmly,

  
*Nicole Mendes*  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR





# THE CHRISTMAS CHAIN



WINNER  
BEST NARRATIVE  
FEATURE FILM  
AWARENESS  
Film Festival  
2024

WINNER  
BEST ACTOR  
PERFORMANCE  
AWARENESS  
Film Festival  
2024

WINNER  
BEST INSPIRATIONAL  
FEATURE FILM  
Christian Family  
Film Festival  
2024

FINALIST  
Urban Mediamakers  
Film Festival (UMFF)  
2024





# THE CHRISTMAS CHAIN

## ***Blends Holiday Heart with a Life-Saving Mission: MNITF's First Feature Film Is Set to Transform the Conversation About Kidney Donation***

Building on its commitment to creating high-quality, relatable content to increase awareness and access to transplantation, the Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation (MNITF) is embarking on its most ambitious project yet: its first feature-length film. ***"MNITF is thrilled to have produced our first feature-length film, furthering our mission to create relatable, engaging projects that not only entertain but make a difference in educating those suffering from kidney disease and their families. This project was made possible through a collaboration with Suzanne DeLaurentiis Productions,"*** shared MNITF Executive Director Nicole Mendez.

*The Christmas Chain* weaves a touching narrative about the power of generosity and community. The story follows Army brothers Dez and Jerome, whose contrasting personalities are tested as they journey home for Christmas following Jerome's serious kidney injury. Their train ride introduces them to Sabrina, a compassionate musician, and leads them to a small-town diner run by Tom, a reclusive man in need of a kidney transplant.







The plot takes a transformative turn when Sabrina offers to donate her kidney to Jerome. This selfless act inspires Dez to consider his own kidney donation, creating a chain reaction of generosity that turns the diner into a beacon of hope. The narrative culminates in a heartwarming holiday gathering at the brothers' family home, embodying the true spirit of giving.

The film features a talented ensemble cast, including Stephen Green, Carissa Murray, Tyler Andrews, Chelsea Gilson, and Michael Paré. Oscar-nominated actor Eric Roberts makes a special cameo appearance, adding significant star power to this heartwarming holiday story.

A premiere screening happened on Wednesday, November 13, 2024, at the prestigious Fine Arts Theater in Beverly Hills. Following this, an exclusive VIP screening was held on Sunday, November 17, at the historic Gary Marshall Theatre in Toluca Lake, offering an intimate viewing experience for select guests.



Suzanne DeLaurentiis

## BEHIND THE VISION: A VETERAN PRODUCER WITH PURPOSE

At the helm of *The Christmas Chain* is Suzanne DeLaurentiis, an award-winning independent producer with over 40 years of industry experience and more than 100 movies to her credit. Hailing from a renowned Hollywood lineage, DeLaurentiis has built her reputation as one of the industry's most dedicated figures. ***"I don't consider it work because it's my passion. Do what you love, and love what you do,"*** she said.

Her versatility extends beyond producing to directing and writing and even includes a background as an opera singer and actress. However, her commitment to philanthropy makes her an ideal partner for this project. DeLaurentiis has earned numerous prestigious accolades, including a Commendation Medal from the U.S. military for her work with veterans through her Operation Hollywood Program.





In recent years, DeLaurentiis has focused on creating films for nonprofits, believing that “there’s nothing more powerful than films that entertain while educating.” Her connection to MNITF began through producing the *Linked by Love* Red Carpet Premiere & Gala with Nicole Mendez, where she recognized the crucial need for raising awareness about kidney donations, particularly within African American and Latino communities.

**“I was happy to contribute funds, goods, and services to co-produce a meaningful project with Nicole,”** DeLaurentiis explained about *The Christmas Chain*, demonstrating her commitment to storytelling and social impact.



## A POWERFUL IMPACT AND A CONTINUED LEGACY

*The Christmas Chain* represents MNITF’s continued dedication to impactful storytelling that educates and inspires. Through the interweaving stories of its characters, the film illuminates the challenges of kidney disease while celebrating the transformative power of organ donation. It serves as both an entertaining film and a powerful tool for raising awareness about transplantation, particularly among audiences unfamiliar with these critical health issues.

By combining a compelling narrative with vital health education, *The Christmas Chain* advances MNITF’s mission of creating innovative media projects that resonate with those affected by kidney disease while spreading a message of hope and generosity.

### Community Spotlight



We are also excited to announce that the Hodges Home Collection has our limited edition, custom-made Christmas blankets on their website.

**For every blanket sold, \$5.00 will be donated.**





# CROWDS GATHER FOR

# THE CHRISTMAS CHAIN



## PREMIERES IN LOS ANGELES

The holiday spirit was in full swing as *The Christmas Chain* made its grand debut at the Fine Arts Theater in Beverly Hills and the Gary Marshall Theater in Burbank. The premieres, hosted by the Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation (MNITF) and Suzanne DeLaurentiis Productions, drew an enthusiastic crowd of attendees, including fans, supporters, and Hollywood insiders.

Celebrity cast members **Eric Roberts** and **Michael Paré** lit up the red carpet alongside key stars **Stephen Green**, **Carissa Murray**, and **Tyler Andrews**. Producers **Nicole Mendez** and **Suzanne DeLaurentiis** delighted guests with a festive reception complete with special holiday-themed gifts.

The events were made possible by the generous support of sponsors, including: **Total Financial Wealth Management** and **TFS Financial Insurance Services** (Gold sponsor); **Maralyn & Justin Dooley** (Silver sponsor); **Parking Company of America** (Bronze sponsor); **Pink's Hot Dogs**; **Tona**, and **Booze and Brews**.

Now available for streaming on **Tubi**, **Apple TV**, **Vudu**, **Google Play**, and **iTunes**, *The Christmas Chain* is poised to become a holiday favorite, inspiring audiences with its message of hope and the spirit of giving.



TFS Financial Insurance Services  
Total Financial Solutions, Inc.



# FILM FESTIVAL SPOTLIGHT

MNITF is thrilled to announce that *The Christmas Chain* has already received awards and recognition from esteemed film festivals across the U.S.

2024 Urban Mediamakers Film Festival Finalist





The film is currently up for consideration at these festivals:

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## FAITH HOPE & LOVE

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SCREENWRITING & FILM FESTIVAL



LOS ANGELES  
INTERNATIONAL  
UNDERGROUND  
FILM FESTIVAL



We're also incredibly honored to announce that *The Christmas Chain* has received the prestigious **Dove Seal of Approval** (Faith and Family-Focused Reviews for Today's Media).



*"The Christmas Chain is a movie that draws you into its charms. The story is engaging, and the end goal of trying to obtain a kidney donation for two different characters is compelling . . . The movie contains important themes such as the importance of family and giving of oneself to others . . . It's a wonderful, festive, and uplifting film."*

—[Dove.org](https://www.dove.org)

Our heartfelt congratulations go out to the entire production team and all of our generous supporters! Together, we are making a difference.





A photograph of actor Stephen Green, smiling and wearing a red sweater. The background is blurred, suggesting an indoor setting with warm lighting.

# *A Conversation with Stephen Green*

**STAR OF THE CHRISTMAS CHAIN**

In an exclusive interview, Stephen Green, who plays Dez (Desmond Powell) in ***The Christmas Chain***, shares his experience and personal connection to the film's mission.





**Q:** How did you land the lead role in *The Christmas Chain*?

**A:** It's one of those stories you typically only see in the movies. I had previously worked on a film titled *SCARS* with Suzanne DeLaurentiis, which was an absolute joy to be a part of. Earlier this year, Suzanne reached out about an upcoming project for which she believed I was a fit. A few weeks later, I received an audition that went well, which led to a chemistry read with our casting director, Craig Campobasso, and some of my future cast mates. This happened while the business was recovering from the strike, so receiving a call, audition, and booking was beyond a blessing. It shows that hard work, building great relationships, and being a good person really does pay off.

**Q:** Why was this role important to you personally?

**A:** This role was important for multiple reasons. First, being able to represent anyone who puts on that uniform is an honor. Our writer, Tricia Aurand, did an incredible job giving many layers to my character, Dez (Desmond Powell). You get to see Dez as a soldier and a loving, caring, charismatic human being. Our troops are real people who deal with everyday issues just like us. Secondly, Dez was similar to me; he's a leader in the field and at home, a caregiver, and a genuine individual. It was also important because I got to help bring awareness about kidney disease in minority communities, which touches home for me. Plus, it's a Christmas movie—and who doesn't love a good Christmas movie?

**Q:** Can you tell us about your personal connection to kidney disease?

**A:** I was born and raised in Winston-Salem, NC. In the South, it's hard not to mention diabetes and kidney disease. They both have a major impact on Southerners' health, especially in minority communities. It has directly affected my family, particularly my father. He's a Type 2 Diabetic on dialysis—he actually just got out of the hospital hours before this interview. Seeing what he deals with firsthand, how it could have been prevented, and what could help him get better if the knowledge had been easily accessible, this role is partially dedicated to him.





**Q:** What makes this movie uniquely meaningful?

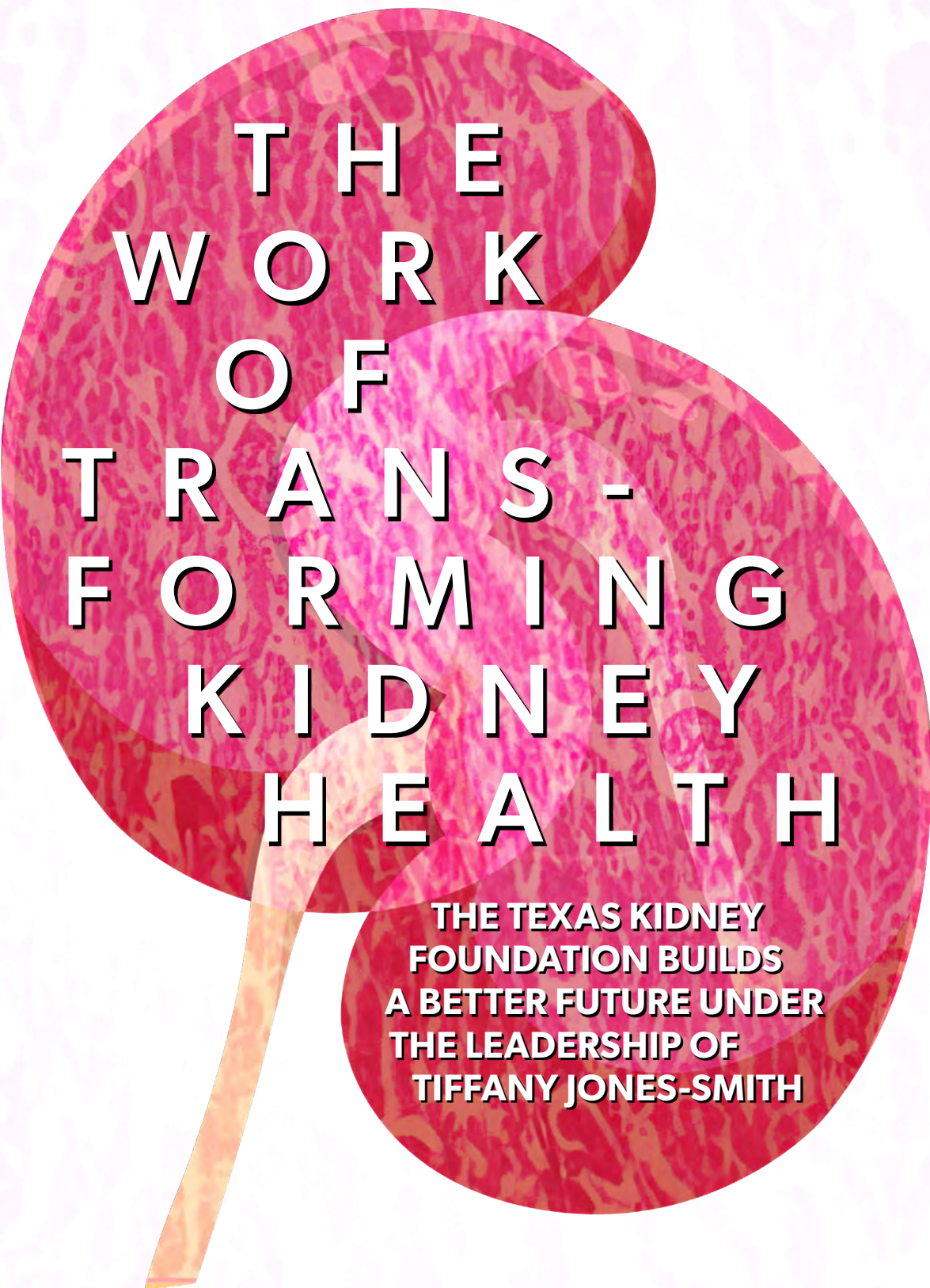
**A:** Honestly, it's the story and its small details. For example, my character and his brother are traveling home for the holidays with their doctor. Showing a strong relationship with your doctor, having a family doctor, maintaining regular communication, and following medical advice, these things aren't shown or practiced enough in underserved minority communities. I have to credit Tricia's great writing and her collaboration with Nicole Mendez of MNITF. The film shares vital information, and everyone brought their A-game. I believe that will show on camera.

**Q:** What did you learn about kidney donor chains during this project?

**A:** I had no idea about the kidney chain before reading the script—it's amazing! You want to talk about paying it forward! I thought organ donation was simply about checking if you matched someone who needed a kidney. But the kidney chain system is remarkable; even if you're not a match for your intended recipient, you can help someone else while also helping find a match for your loved one. Truly remarkable! We explain this process in the film, and I'm excited for people to learn about it. This knowledge could help so many more people.







**T H E  
W O R K  
O F  
T R A N S -  
F O R M I N G  
K I D N E Y  
H E A L T H**

**THE TEXAS KIDNEY  
FOUNDATION BUILDS  
A BETTER FUTURE UNDER  
THE LEADERSHIP OF  
TIFFANY JONES-SMITH**





Since 2011, the Texas Kidney Foundation (TKF) has supported Texans impacted by kidney disease, offering life-saving education, preventive care, and organ donation advocacy. For TKF CEO Tiffany Jones-Smith, the journey with TKF began in the most personal way—with a call for help from her cousin, Darrell Jr., a young chef on dialysis who had started experiencing worrisome heart palpitations. Having already lost nine family members to kidney disease, she knew the stakes and urged him to get immediate medical attention.

While visiting a nephrology clinic with Darrell, Tiffany noticed a Texas Kidney Foundation walk postcard and rallied her family to join, igniting her journey with TKF. Watching her cousin Darrell’s struggle firsthand, she recognized the urgent need for early intervention. **“Too many families like ours are searching for help without knowing where to turn,”** she said, underscoring that with timely awareness and decisive action, 80% of end-stage kidney disease cases could be prevented.

What began as a search for resources ultimately led to a calling. In 2017, Jones-Smith became TKF’s President and CEO, bringing over 20 years of executive experience and earning a Harvard Business School credential along the way. Her impact grew statewide, leading to her appointment by Governor Abbott to the Texas Chronic Kidney Disease Task Force in 2020.



Tiffany Jones-Smith

Jones-Smith’s commitment to kidney health has only strengthened with her recent diagnosis of APOL1-mediated kidney disease (AMKD)—the same genetic condition that claimed 16 of her family members—while her husband manages stage 2 kidney disease. Together, they take preventive measures, including a kidney-friendly diet and SGLT2 inhibitors. **“Lifestyle changes, SGLT2 inhibitors, and taking ownership of my healthcare journey have been game-changers,”** she shared. Her dedication extends beyond personal measures; as a co-investigator on the *Diagnosis, Education, and Care of Patients with APOL1-Associated Nephropathy: A Delphi Consensus and Systematic Review*, she actively contributes to advancing care for her family and countless others facing kidney disease.



## A FOUNDATION BUILT ON STRATEGIC VISION

TKF's Knowledge2Action 2030 Neighbors Helping Neighbors initiative addresses a critical gap in kidney disease care: while early-stage kidney disease is often detectable in blood and urine tests, best practices delay notifying patients until a formal diagnosis is made—typically only after a person has been in stage 3b for three months. By this point, substantial kidney function has already been lost. TKF's innovative, scalable service model prioritizes early detection, proactive communication, and connections to continuum of care resources in high-risk populations. The TKF team empowers patients to manage their health with resources rather than resorting to emergency rooms.

***“Our focus on high-risk groups allows us to gather data that has an impact statewide,”*** explained Jones-Smith. This targeted approach strengthens TKF's role as a statewide leader and has earned its recognition as a research institution under the NIH's All of Us program. By emphasizing early notification and targeted intervention, TKF is setting a new standard in kidney disease prevention.

***“By focusing on high-risk groups and strategically targeting Bexar County and 72 other key areas across Texas, we've gathered compelling data and sparked a powerful, patient-driven movement,”*** Jones-Smith shared. ***“This approach doesn't just give doctors more information; it gives people like me the chance to take control of our health and make a real difference in our communities. Seeing the impact of empowering people to take control of their health and the difference it made in high-risk communities led us, in 2021, to focus on building scalable models. These models are designed to bring the same patient-centered, data-driven approach to any community, allowing us to expand our reach and make meaningful change wherever it's needed most.”***

**TEXAS KIDNEY  
FOUNDATION**





Jones-Smith's strategic vision has also extended deep into the foundation's internal operations, leading to changes in data collection, streamlined processes, and a sharpened mission to boost TKF's impact. **"We basically rebuilt the foundation from the ground up during the pandemic,"** she explained. She introduced a streamlined approach to resource allocation, focusing on mental health resources and community health workers. Her staffing strategy now focuses on recruiting mission- and vision-aligned top talent.



Reginald Ballard

## PREVENTION, EDUCATION, AND ADVOCACY

TKF's Educational Health Screening program reflects Jones-Smith's commitment to prevention-focused care because of her personal experience with AMKD. Through the Knowledge2Action 2030 Neighbors Helping Neighbors initiative, this free program offers educational screenings for hypertension, diabetes, and more than 385 kidney diseases, providing crucial kidney health insights to participants in just 15 minutes. TKF's focused approach has paid off: in 2023 and 2024, TKF earned NIH Fellowships, culminating in a poster presentation, *Extraction of Datamarkers of Health and Neurological Sequelae in Cardiometabolic Disease: An Epidemiogenetic Study Using AI/ML*, at the August 2024 AI for Health Equity Symposium AIM-AHEAD Annual Meeting. An analysis of 13,758 participants revealed that 41.46% had elevated A1C levels, indicating diabetes risk, while 36.15% had GFR readings below 60 ml/min, signaling significant kidney impairment. These findings underscore TKF's vital role in early identification and intervention for high-risk individuals.



## BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS FOR GREATER IMPACT

A crucial element of TKF's success has been its emphasis on cultivating partnerships to increase transplantation, and connecting with the Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation







Barbara Gervin-Hawkins

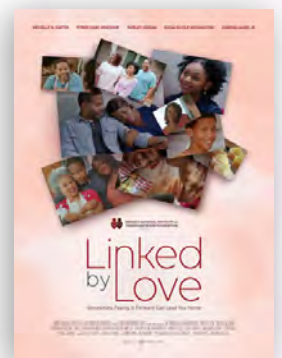
(MNITF) has already made an impact. The collaboration began when Jones-Smith discovered MNITF’s two edutainment series, *Fixing Paco* and *Linked by Love*, which focus on the realities of kidney disease, dialysis, and the need for transplantation through the lens of a family story. ***“We really connected with the Fixing Paco and Linked by Love series because they show transplantation just like***

***we do—through the lens of the whole family,”*** Jones-Smith shared. ***“We always say that if one person has kidney disease, the whole family lives with it. These videos and discussion panels are such powerful educational tools for our community.”***

These resources have been particularly effective in Hispanic and Black communities. At a landmark screening during San Antonio’s Dream Week in January 2024, the Mexican Cultural Institute hosted a special director’s cut featuring segments from both series. The event drew an impressive cross-section of community leaders, including the mayor of San Antonio, the Mexican Consul, county commissioners, leaders from various churches, and hospital representatives. ***“Dream Week is designed to show how organizations embody MLK’s dream and what he stood for,”*** explained Jones-Smith. ***“It’s a time where we all stop and reflect on humanity and coming together in unity.”***

Nicole Mendez, Executive Director of MNITF, who met Jones-Smith in person for the first time at the screening, noted, ***“The partnership between MNITF and the Texas Kidney Foundation has been incredibly impactful. Working together allows us to combine resources and expertise to raise awareness about kidney disease in communities that need it the most.”***

TKF’s collaboration with the promotion of *The Christmas Chain*, MNITF’s first feature-length film, unites MNITF, the TKF Helping Our People Empower (HOPE) program, co-sponsor the San Antonio African American Community Archive and Museum (SAAACAM), and the Smithsonian’s National Conversation on Race (NCOR) to emphasize the vital role of community, transparency, and shared history in addressing healthcare disparities. Scheduled to premiere at the Mexican





Consulate, TKF views the film as a powerful storytelling tool that, through NCOR's platform, sparks conversations about transplantation and brings clarity to these issues in a relatable way. Created by Nicole Mendez and Suzanne DeLaurentiis, the film's unifying theme, "all kidneys are pink," inspires inclusion and a sense of shared humanity.



Tiffany Jones-Smith & Kevin Smith

## LOOKING AHEAD: A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Through initiatives like Knowledge2Action 2030 Neighbors Helping Neighbors, TKF addresses the widespread lack of awareness about kidney disease among patients and healthcare providers. ***"We're not just identifying kidney disease—we're giving our community the tools to take control of their health and stop this epidemic,"*** Jones-Smith shared. ***"Nobody is coming to save us. Together, we can save each other."***

With a blend of data-driven insights, strategic partnerships, and personal passion, Tiffany Jones-Smith is leading TKF toward a future where kidney disease is caught early, treated effectively, and understood by all.





# T H E NEPHROLOGIST IS IN

## DR. VINCENT ANTHONY DISCUSSES THE LINK BETWEEN HYPERTENSION AND KIDNEY DISEASE

Vincent Anthony, MD, MPH, MBA, FASN, CPE, CHCQM, is a nephrologist who serves as President & CEO of Kidney Care Institute and Founder & CEO of K.Care IPA. As a principal medical advisor for MNITF's *Linked by Love* series, Dr. Anthony has consistently highlighted the critical relationship between hypertension and kidney disease. Known for his culturally sensitive approach to patient care, Dr. Anthony notes that hypertension—a condition affecting nearly one in two adults in the U.S.—doesn't just threaten heart health; it's also a leading contributor to kidney disease, especially within African American, Hispanic American, and Native American communities who are at greater risk. ***"Hypertension's effects on the kidneys can be silent but devastating,"*** he explained. ***"Educating people on prevention is key to slowing the progression of kidney disease."***



*Dr. Vincent Anthony*

When high blood pressure is left unchecked, it narrows blood vessels throughout the body, including in the kidneys, reducing blood flow and impeding their ability to filter waste and excess fluid. Over time, this damage creates a vicious cycle: Damaged kidneys can increase blood pressure further through fluid retention and hormonal imbalances, setting up an escalating risk for kidney disease. ***"Understanding this relationship empowers individuals to take preventive action,"*** noted Dr. Anthony.

# DR. ANTHONY'S TOP 10 TIPS FOR PREVENTING HYPERTENSION

To help you be proactive in managing your risk for hypertension, Dr. Anthony offers these practical tips:

## 1. Regularly Monitor Your Blood Pressure

Knowing your numbers is the first step. Regular blood-pressure monitoring helps you and your healthcare provider track trends and make appropriate adjustments as needed.

## 2. Eat a Balanced Diet

Focus on a diet rich in whole foods, fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains. The DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet helps effectively lowers blood pressure and can be a good option to explore.

## 3. Limit Salt Intake

Reducing sodium can significantly impact blood pressure levels. Aim for less than 2,300 mg. daily or even 1,500 mg., if possible.

## 4. Maintain a Healthy Weight

Losing just a small amount of weight can help lower blood pressure. Aim for a sustainable, balanced approach to weight management.

## 5. Exercise Regularly

Physical activity strengthens the heart and improves circulation. Strive for at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise, like brisk walking, most days of the week.

## 6. Reduce Stress

Chronic stress can elevate blood pressure. Deep breathing techniques and adopting meditation or other regular relaxation exercises can help you manage stress.

## 7. Limit Alcohol Consumption

Drinking alcohol can raise blood pressure, so stick to recommended limits: no more than one drink per day for women and two for men.

## 8. Quit Smoking

Tobacco use can raise blood pressure and damage blood vessels. Quitting is one of the most beneficial steps for heart, lung, and kidney health.

## 9. Get Enough Quality Sleep

Poor sleep is linked to high blood pressure. To help regulate blood pressure, aim for seven to eight hours of restful sleep each night.

## 10. Stay Hydrated and Limit Caffeine

Staying hydrated supports kidney health, while high caffeine intake can cause temporary spikes in blood pressure. As with everything else, moderation is key.





# Home for the Holidays: Kidney-Friendly Pumpkin Pie!

The holiday season is a time to enjoy delicious food with family and friends, and caring for your kidneys can be part of that joy. MNITF's collection of Kidney-Friendly Holiday Recipes makes it easy to celebrate with dishes that are both nourishing and flavorful.

This easy pumpkin pie recipe has been carefully crafted to support your kidney health without sacrificing taste. And with ingredients chosen to keep phosphorus, potassium, and sodium levels in check, you can savor every bite!

Who knew caring for your kidneys could taste this good?

## Kidney-Friendly Pumpkin Pie w/ Graham Cracker Crust Recipe

### INGREDIENTS

- Whole grain graham cracker crust
- 1 can, pumpkin puree
- 2 eggs
- 1/2 cup, stevia
- 1/2 teaspoon, cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon, nutmeg
- 1/4 teaspoon, ginger
- 1/4 teaspoon, NoSalt
- 1 cup, unsweetened almond milk

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat the oven to 425°F.
2. In a bowl, mix together the pumpkin puree, eggs, stevia, cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, and NoSalt.
3. Gradually add the unsweetened almond milk, stirring until smooth.
4. Pour the mixture into the graham cracker crust.
5. Bake at 425°F for 15 minutes, then reduce the heat to 350°F and bake for an additional 40–50 minutes, or until the pie is set.
6. Allow the pie to cool before serving.

**Shopping Tip:** Always check labels to choose items with low phosphorus and avoid dairy!

*Note: This recipe is considered kidney-healthy. However, if you have been diagnosed with kidney disease, kidney failure, diabetes, hypertension, or another condition, please consult a healthcare provider or dietitian to ensure this recipe suits your specific dietary needs.*

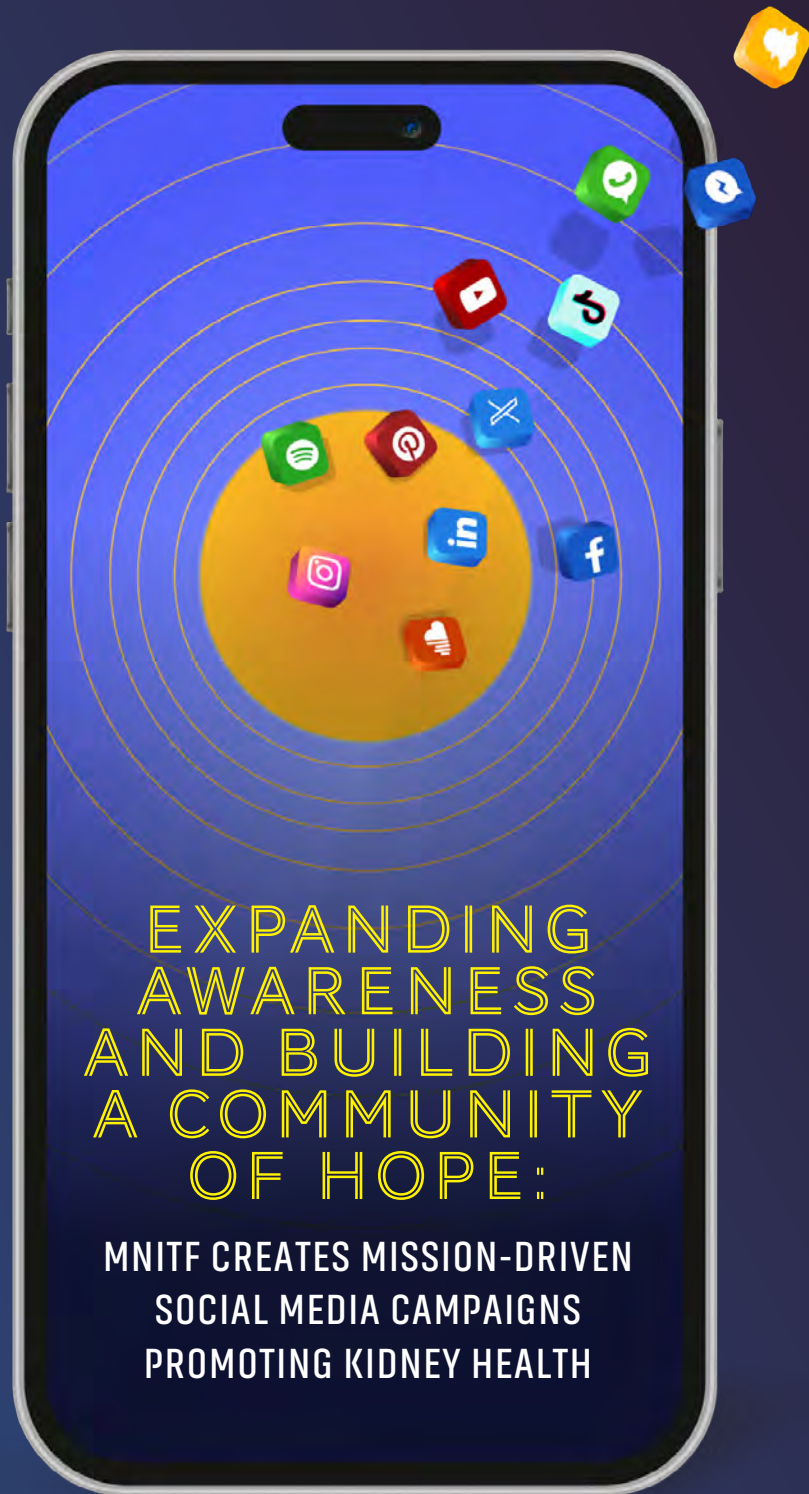
### Common Ingredient Alternatives

- Salt: Mrs. Morton Lite Salt, Himalayan Pink Salt, NoSalt, Nu-Salt
- Sugar: Monk fruit sweetener, stevia sweetener
- Milk: Rice milk, unsweetened almond milk, coconut milk, oat milk, hemp milk
- Butter: Unsalted butter, plant-based butter, olive oil, margarine
- Flour: White all-purpose flour, rice flour
- All-Purpose Seasoning Brands: Mrs. Dash, McCormick's Salt-Free Seasonings, Simply Organic, Trader Joe's All-Purpose Seasoning

*Reminder: Ingredients containing phosphorus often list terms like disodium phosphate, monosodium phosphate, and phosphoric acid on the label.*

For more kidney-friendly recipes, visit  
<https://www.linkedbylovetv.org/holiday-recipes>

Enjoy!



As part of its mission to raise awareness about kidney health, the Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation (MNITF) has expanded its digital presence through innovative social media campaigns. Inspired by the success of its multi-award-winning edutainment series *Linked by Love*, MNITF has launched impactful campaigns across multiple platforms designed to educate and foster a community of support around kidney disease and transplantation.



## Addressing the Need for *Linked by Love*

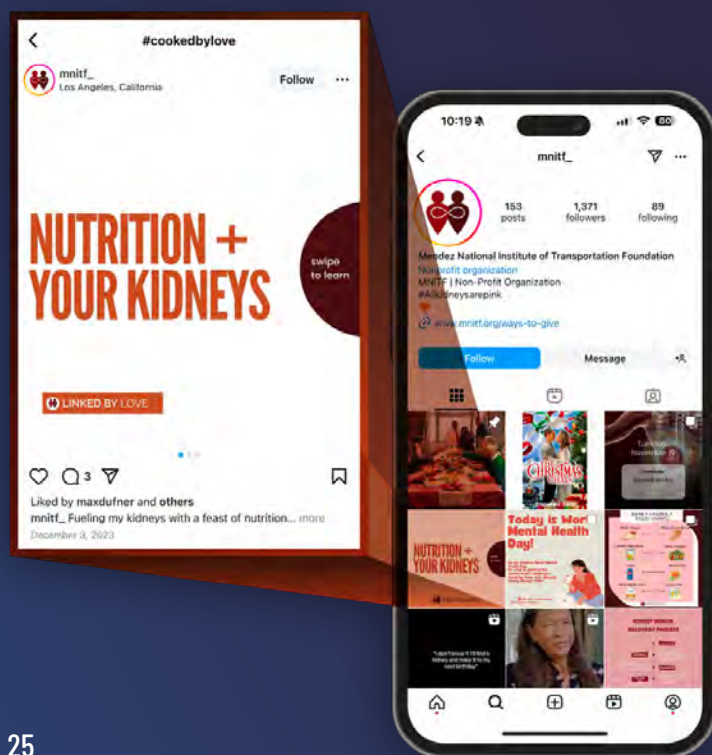
Chronic kidney disease (CKD) disproportionately affects Black American populations, who face a 25% higher prevalence rate than White Americans and are nearly four times more likely to develop kidney failure. Recognizing the urgent need for education and awareness in underserved communities, MNITF developed *Linked by Love*, a digital series that explores one Black family’s journey with end-stage renal disease. Through the story of Beverly Morris and her family, the series tackles the unique cultural barriers and healthcare disparities that prevent many Black Americans from accessing transplantation as a treatment option.

Each episode follows the Morris family’s emotional and physical journey as they explore treatment options, including living donor kidney chains. By weaving critical information into a compelling narrative, *Linked by Love* breaks down complex medical topics in ways that resonate deeply with viewers, educating them about kidney disease, kidney failure, and the importance of self-care and family support.

## Building on Past Campaigns: Cooked By Love and Unfiltered

MNITF’s Cooked By Love and Unfiltered campaigns from 2023 set a strong foundation for the organization’s social media success, significantly enhancing engagement across platforms. These campaigns leveraged relatable, educational content tailored to each platform, from visually appealing Instagram posts to interactive Facebook infographics. Their success underscored the effectiveness of combining education with entertainment—this year’s campaigns are building on that momentum.

The 2024 holiday season will see the relaunch of Cooked By Love, with a renewed focus on kidney-friendly holiday recipes, featuring tips on preparing nutritious, low-potassium dishes under the hashtag #CookByLove.



## Social Media Successes and Metrics

MNITF's social media team has effectively leveraged TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook to bring the *Linked by Love* series to a wider audience, sharing messages that resonate with people from all backgrounds. The success of these campaigns has been undeniable, with platform-specific approaches driving high engagement:

- **TikTok:** Short-form videos with engaging music and relatable content thrived, helping MNITF reach a younger demographic.
- **Instagram:** Curated posts and stories boosted interaction, presenting kidney health information in visually appealing formats.
- **Facebook:** Infographics and informative posts led to significant engagement on Facebook, where followers appreciated in-depth educational content.

These campaigns also achieved impressive metrics:

- **Follower Growth:** A 621% increase compared to last year's 19% growth
- **Engagement Rate:** A rate of 5.89%, achieved without the use of paid influencers
- **Total Engagements:** More than 40,176 likes, shares, and comments
- **Reach:** Engaged 463,123 unique users





## Upcoming Holiday Campaigns and The Christmas Chain



Building on this momentum, MNITF is launching additional campaigns for the 2024 holiday season. The Cooked By Love campaign, a staple from last year, will be relaunched to encourage kidney-friendly holiday meals. It will feature tips on preparing nutritious, low-potassium dishes under the hashtag #CookByLove.

Alongside this, MNITF will promote *The Christmas Chain*. This new feature-length film tells the story of two Army brothers who encounter a chain of generosity through kidney donation during the Christmas season. ***“Our social media campaigns are about more than just increasing visibility; they’re about creating meaningful connections and fostering a supportive community around kidney health and transplantation,”*** explained Nicole Mendez, MNITF’s Executive Director. ***“With Linked by Love and now The Christmas Chain, we’re using digital platforms to bring life-changing information directly to those who need it most. The response has been incredible, and it’s clear that storytelling combined with education can truly inspire action and support within our community.”***

## A Comprehensive Strategy for 2025

The continued success of *Linked by Love* has laid the groundwork for MNITF’s ambitious 2025 content strategy, with campaigns planned around key health awareness months. MNITF will highlight Black History Month in February, leading into National Kidney Month in March. April will feature National Donate Life Month, and a Spring into Action campaign will run from May to June, promoting kidney health and outdoor activities. Summer Wellness in July through September will focus on hydration and kidney-friendly lifestyle choices, with Cooked By Love returning to close out the year with more kidney-friendly holiday recipes.

Throughout 2025, MNITF will maintain a consistent posting schedule on Meta and TikTok to reach as many individuals as possible, ensuring that kidney health education remains accessible, relatable, and impactful. By building on the success of past campaigns, MNITF is creating a space where kidney health awareness can thrive year-round, supporting patients, families, and communities on their journey toward better health.



# Continuing a **LEGACY** **OF INNOVATION IN TRANSPLANTATION** **MNITF ANNOUNCES ITS 2024 RESEARCH GRANT PROGRAM RECIPIENTS**

The Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation (MNITF) Research Grant Program (RGP) is dedicated to advancing the science and practice of transplantation—a mission that has guided the foundation since its inception. Established in 2014 as part of a merger with the Mendez National Institute of Transplantation, the RGP embodies the vision of Drs. Robert and Rafael Mendez, pioneers in the field of kidney transplantation. Although both founders have passed, MNITF continues to honor their legacy by supporting research projects that address critical needs in transplantation, from improved organ quality assessment to enhanced patient outcomes.

Through the RGP, MNITF has forged a unique model, fostering partnerships with private organizations to fund innovative, high-impact research projects. ***“As a member of the Research Advisory Board, I’m privileged to work with highly esteemed colleagues to encourage innovation in transplantation and regenerative medicine,”*** noted Nori Kasahara, MD. ***“It’s especially exciting to facilitate the influx of new ideas and technologies into our field. In this context, MNITF fulfills a particularly valuable role by supporting high-risk/high-reward projects that might not otherwise be funded through traditional funding agencies, and our review process enables direct interactions with early-stage investigators and seasoned researchers worldwide who bring unique expertise to transplantation research.”***

Reflecting on the program’s impact, MNITF Executive Director Nicole Mendez shared, ***“Since 2015, we have awarded 47 grants, surpassing \$4.25 million in total funding. This year marked an important milestone as we crossed the \$4 million threshold.”***





## IN 2024, MNITF HAS AWARDED THE FOLLOWING GRANTS:

### University of Birmingham, UK

*Principal Investigator: Heather Long*

*Awarded Amount: \$123,884.30*

**Project Title:** Validating Biomarkers for Post-Transplant Lymphoproliferative Disease (PTLD) After Organ Transplant



Post-transplant lymphoproliferative disease (PTLD) is a type of blood cancer that develops in transplant patients because the drugs used to prevent organ rejection weaken the immune system. There are no good clinical markers of early disease, and patient survival is very poor. The Grantee has identified differences in the blood of organ transplant patients who have developed PTLD that could provide clinical markers for early identification and monitoring of at-risk organ transplant patients. The Grantee now aims to validate these findings using additional tests and samples from an independent group of patients.

### University of Michigan

*Principal Investigator: Lonnie Shea*

*Awarded Amount: \$150,000*

**Project Title:** Biomaterial Implants for Early Detection of Transplant Vasculopathy with Minimal Invasiveness



There is no assay to predict chronic graft rejection (i.e., vasculopathy); clinicians rely on graft biopsy and imaging, which identify late vasculopathy only after extensive injury. Blood-based assays also measure lagging indicators of damage. The Grantee has developed a subcutaneous biomaterial implant (“scaffold”) that remotely collects immune cell biomarkers to identify pre-injury graft rejection and reduce biopsy need. In this work, the Grantee will develop scaffold implants that identify novel biomarkers of early transplant vasculopathy in rodent models to create a new therapeutic window. Identifying actionable biomarkers of and targets for vasculopathy is paramount so clinicians can personalize immunotherapies and avoid graft loss.

## Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center

Principal Investigator: David Hildeman

Awarded Amount: \$150,000

**Project Title:** From Rejection to Resolution: Single-Cell Multiomic Analysis of Kidney Transplant Rejection



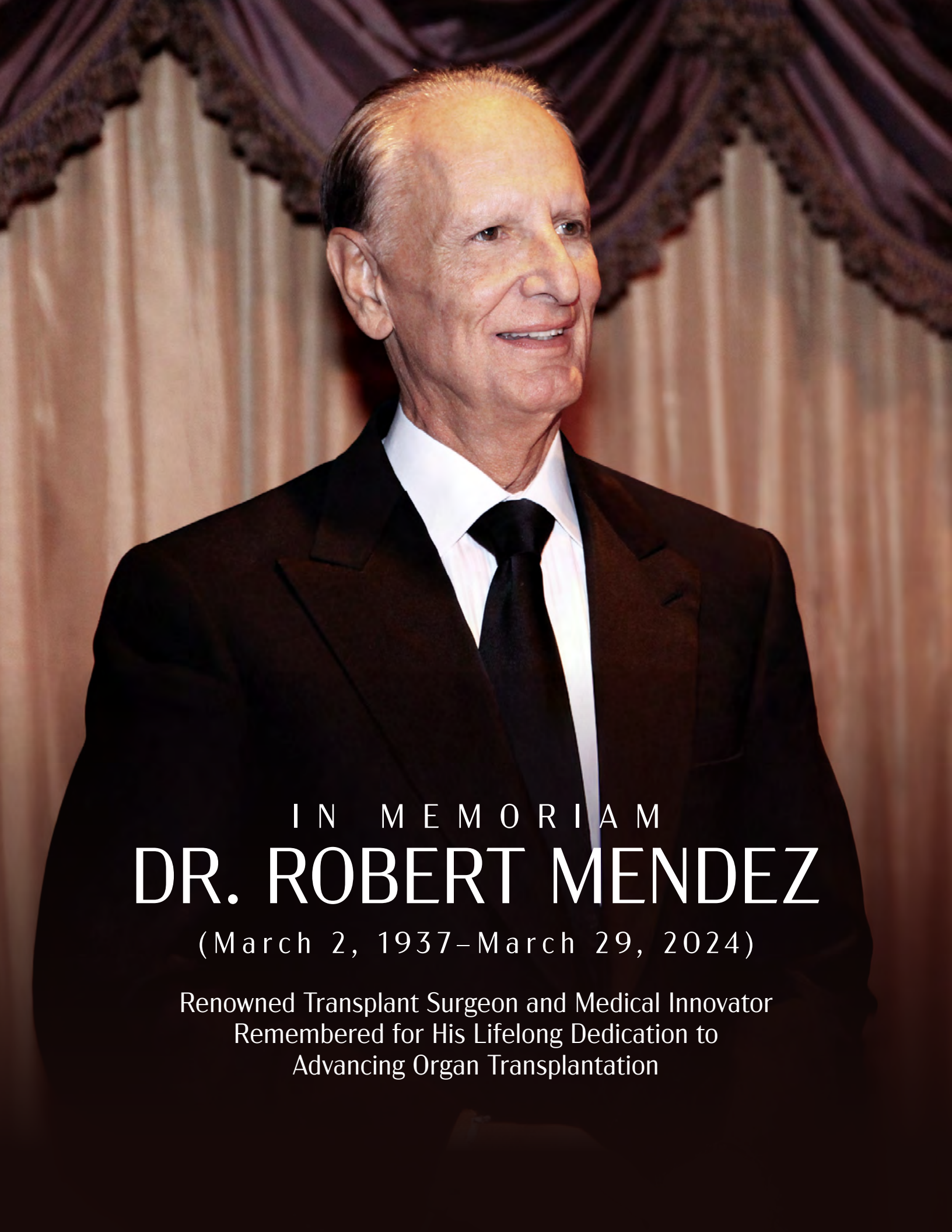
Transplanted organs are lost because recipients' immune cells reject them. The Applicant's data shows that the individual cells driving rejection persist despite treatment, can come back to cause rejection again, and can also be found in the urine. Using unique approaches to analyze individual cells, we will compare the cells in the kidney tissue to those found in the urine before, during, and after anti-rejection therapy. Our overall goal is to define cells and molecules that could be measured in a noninvasive way to predict rejection, as well as successful response to anti-rejection treatment.



The MNITF Research Grant Program embodies the foundation's commitment to continuing the legacy of Drs. Robert and Rafael Mendez; and the 2024 grantees represent a step forward in this mission. ***"The Research Grant Program was created to bridge the gap between groundbreaking ideas and real-world impact in transplantation medicine,"*** expressed Justin Dooley, Chairman of MNITF. ***"By supporting innovative research projects, we're not just funding studies—we're investing in the future of transplantation while honoring the pioneering spirit of Drs. Robert and Rafael Mendez. They showed us that progress in transplantation comes from bold thinking and unwavering dedication to patient care. Through this program, we're ensuring that their spirit of innovation continues to benefit patients for generations to come."***





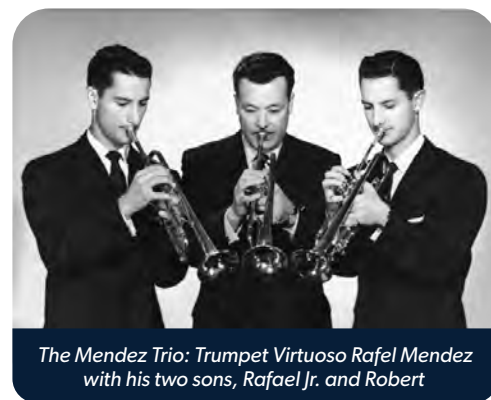


IN MEMORIAM  
**DR. ROBERT MENDEZ**

(March 2, 1937–March 29, 2024)

Renowned Transplant Surgeon and Medical Innovator  
Remembered for His Lifelong Dedication to  
Advancing Organ Transplantation

Dr. Robert Mendez, a visionary in organ transplantation and a pioneering transplant surgeon, passed away on March 29, 2024. His remarkable career, marked by groundbreaking innovations in kidney transplantation, transformed the lives of countless patients and left an indelible mark on the medical community.



*The Mendez Trio: Trumpet Virtuoso Rafael Mendez with his two sons, Rafael Jr. and Robert*

Throughout his life, Dr. Mendez balanced his trailblazing career with his role as a devoted family man. In 1973, he married Valerie Rosemunde Mendez, and together they raised three children. Even after Valerie's passing in 2010, Dr. Mendez continued to cherish his family, including his beloved grandchildren.

Before starting his medical career, Robert and his twin brother, Rafael, shared a rich musical legacy. The Mendez brothers played the trumpet alongside their father, the legendary virtuoso trumpeter Rafael Mendez Sr., touring the U.S. and Europe and even appearing on television shows like *The Ed Sullivan Show*. This deep connection to music remained a constant thread throughout their lives, informing their approach to both medicine and education.

Dr. Mendez's medical journey began alongside his brother Rafael, with whom he would form a formidable partnership throughout their careers. Together, they cofounded the Mendez National Institute of Transplantation (MNIT), which became a driving force in advancing the science and practice of organ transplantation for over three decades.



*Robert Mendez and actor Larry Hagman*

The Mendez brothers' impact on the field of transplantation was profound and far-reaching. They led the kidney transplant program at St. Vincent Medical Center, performing more than 6,000 kidney transplants. Their expertise also extended to transplant programs at the University of Southern California and Sharp Memorial Medical Center in San Diego. Their work laid the foundation for innovative research in areas such as immunologic tolerance, infectious diseases in transplantation, and advanced surgical techniques.







Robert & Rafael Mendez with actor Gregory Peck

Dr. Mendez's influence extended far beyond the operating room. He and his brother were dedicated educators who created the MNIT Transplant Fellow Program, training more than 30 physicians from around the world. Their commitment to advancing medical education helped build transplant programs in countries such as Spain, Italy, Turkey, Brazil, and Mexico, truly globalizing their impact.

In 2014, MNIT merged with the Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation (MNITF), ensuring that the brothers' legacy would continue. Even after the passing of both Robert and Rafael Mendez, their vision lives on through the foundation's work. As Nicole Mendez, Executive Director of MNITF, shared, ***"Our research grant program continues to fulfill my father and uncle's vision by providing grants to impactful research that otherwise would not be funded. In addition, our education programs provide vital healthcare information to at-risk populations, ensuring that those who have difficulty accessing transplantation receive a second chance at life. Their influence on transplantation will continue as MNITF carries forward their mission."***

Robert Mendez's dedication to his patients was legendary, as illustrated by a touching personal anecdote shared by Justin Dooley, Chairman of MNITF: ***"Robert's persistence and kindness were unmatched. My sister-in-law, Madalyn, a near-blind diabetic, had waited five hours in his office but had to leave. When Robert discovered this, he looked up her address and drove to her apartment. She refused to let him in, so Robert told her he had come by cab and needed to call one. She let him in, and despite his severe allergies to cats—she had several—he spent over an hour sneezing and coughing while convincing her to undergo a life-saving transplant. That was Robert: persistent, compassionate, and utterly dedicated to his patients."***



Rafael & Robert Mendez

Dooley continued, ***“The transplant took place on Good Friday during Easter weekend in 1989. In a poignant twist of fate, Robert passed away on Good Friday. His dedication gave my sister-in-law the gift of life, and his impact on our family will never be forgotten. Robert and Rafael revolutionized transplantation and did it all in service of others. They were not just brilliant doctors but humble, kind, and dedicated to saving lives. I will forever miss Robert’s friendship and mentorship.”***

The passing of Dr. Robert Mendez marks the end of an era in transplant medicine. But his legacy, along with that of his brother, Rafael, lives on through the countless lives they saved, the medical professionals they trained, and the institutions they helped build. Their unique combination of surgical expertise, educational passion, and profound humanity will continue to inspire future generations of medical professionals. As the community mourns the loss of these pioneering brothers, it also celebrates lives dedicated to the noblest pursuits of medicine: healing, teaching, and advancing the boundaries of what’s possible in patient care.

Dr. Mendez is survived by his children, Danielle, Robert Jr., and Alexandra, as well as his grandchildren, Dylan, Sasha, Jasper, Hudson, Paxton, Harper, and Chloe.



*Robert Mendez and his family*



# WAYS TO GIVE

*The Gift of Making a Difference*

You can be an important part of continuing the mission of MNITF and helping to save and improve the lives of so many. Financial giving to MNITF creates unique opportunities for us to devote necessary resources to further advancing research and education. Below is a list of ways that you, your family, and friends can help keep the flame of hope alive for potential transplant recipients.



## DIRECTED GIVING

With a planned giving strategy, you can earmark your contribution for any area of MNITF's work that you choose, including the Research Grant Program and Education projects.



## GIFT OF CASH

This is the simplest and most common type of support. You can make a one-time gift, monthly payments, or pledge to donate over a one- to five-year period.



## MEMORIAL OR HONORARIUM GIFTS

This is a gift made in memory of, or in honor of, a loved one. A notification of your gift, with the amount undisclosed, is sent to the recipient indicated.



## LIFE INCOME GIFTS

The most common type of life income gifts are charitable gift annuities and charitable remainder trusts.



## LIFE INSURANCE

Donating a no longer needed policy entitles you to an immediate tax deduction for the policy's current cash value. This applies to whole life and not term life insurance policies.



## BEQUESTS

You can provide a donor's estate with a charitable deduction to offset federal taxes.



The MNITF website ([www.MNITF.org](http://www.MNITF.org)) allows you to donate with a credit card by clicking on the icon above near the bottom of the homepage.

## IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS GIVING, PLEASE CONTACT

Nicole Mendez, Executive Director, at (424) 358-4450  
or via email at [Nicole@MNITF.org](mailto:Nicole@MNITF.org) near the bottom of the homepage.

# WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIFE OF SOMEONE WHO IS SUFFERING FROM KIDNEY DISEASE OR KIDNEY FAILURE?

MAKE A TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATION OF ANY AMOUNT BY



*Your generosity  
makes our work possible!*



EDITOR  
Nicole Mendez  
WRITER  
Stephanie Wiand  
CONTRIBUTOR  
Justin Dooley  
DESIGN & LAYOUT  
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