



MENDEZ NATIONAL INSTITUTE of
TRANSPLANTATION FOUNDATION

A N N U A L M A G A Z I N E 2 0 2 5



A HEART FULL OF HOPE





A LETTER FROM THE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

This year has brought profound challenges to our beloved Los Angeles community, and our hearts go out to all those affected by the devastating fires. We know this has been an incredibly difficult time for so many. Even in the face of such hardship, your unwavering support has enabled us to continue our vital work, and for that we are deeply grateful.

In this year's magazine, you'll find updates on our latest projects, partnerships, and achievements. We are thrilled to share that we recently released our second feature film, *A Heart Full of Hope*, now streaming on Tubi and Amazon. The film has already garnered multiple awards and furthers our outreach to at-risk communities by providing vital healthcare information about kidney disease and access to transplantation. While we continue our deep commitment to the Hispanic and Black communities, we are expanding our outreach to Native American communities, who also face disproportionately high rates of kidney disease and failure.

In June, I was honored to speak at the Texas Department of State Health Services Chronic Kidney Disease Task Force about our work educating the public about kidney disease and transplantation through "edutainment." Our partnership remains strong with the Texas Kidney Foundation, in which they are hosting a screening of our new film on November 14.

Beyond our education efforts, we remain steadfast in our mission to advance the field of transplantation through research and innovation. Over the past decade, we have invested more than \$4.2 million in our Research Grant Program—funding 48 grants that directly translate into saved lives and improved outcomes for those facing end-stage organ disease.

MNITF has achieved significant milestones this year thanks to the dedication of our partners, supporters, and team. We are truly grateful for your support and partnership in this life-saving mission. We wish you a wonderful holiday season!

With heartfelt thanks,
Nicole Mendez

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A HEART FULL OF HOPE



New MNITF holiday film premieres, raising vital awareness for kidney disease

The Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation (MNITF) and Suzanne DeLaurentiis Productions are excited to announce the global streaming release of their new holiday feature, *A Heart Full of Hope*, available through Uncork'd Entertainment.

Written by Tricia Aurand and directed by Dale Fabrigar, *A Heart Full of Hope* is a tender holiday film starring Julia Taylor, Chelsea Cook, and Sebastian Armani. With its themes of perseverance and hope, it promises to be a moving addition to the holiday season lineup.

Learn about the process of becoming a kidney donor, and how it truly is the most selfless gift one can give: the gift of a second chance at life.

A Heart Full of Hope follows Whitney, played by Chelsea Cook, a determined woman in her 30s who refuses to let renal failure or the demands of regular dialysis stand in the way of her dream to earn a college degree. Supporting her is her vibrant younger sister, Lynette, played by Julia Taylor, whose unwavering love masks the heartache of knowing she isn't a match to help Whitney through a kidney transplant.

The story takes an uplifting turn when Whitney forms a unique bond with Sebastian, played by Sebastian Armani. Sebastian is a charismatic teacher who has recently returned home to teach at her college. As Whitney introduces Sebastian to Lynette, sparks fly between them, bringing unexpected joy into their lives.



SEBASTIAN ARMANI, CHELSEA COOK, AND
JULIA TAYLOR



JULIAH TAYLOR

Meanwhile, Lynette's boss, Kaya, a Native American woman, played by Cree Armstead, reveals that her grandfather is battling kidney failure and struggling to find a donor. Through Kaya's heartfelt story, Lynette gains insight into the broader impact of kidney disease within Native American communities and begins understanding the systemic challenges many face in finding treatment.

This poignant feature, produced by Nicole Mendez and Suzanne DeLaurentiis, tells an inspiring story of resilience, love, and the transformative power of kindness while shedding light on the challenges faced by individuals battling renal failure.

“Holiday”

The theme song from *A Heart Full of Hope*, is available now. See the music video featuring moments from the movie.



- Top 10 across the United States and international charts
- Winner: Golden Lion International Film Festival
- Finalist: East Village Film Festival
- Official Selection: Crown Point International, Anatolia International, American Stories, French Riviera
- Official Selection of The French Riviera Film Festival — which runs simultaneously with Cannes in May 2026. The artists will perform and appear at events across the South of France, supported by a big promo push for the song and the film, *A Heart Full of Hope*.



***A Heart Full of Hope* is winning hearts—
recognized by top film festivals across the globe.**

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



WINNER

Cannes World Film Festival
Los Angeles Film Awards
Accolade Global Film Competition



OFFICIAL SELECTION

Glendale International Film Festival



FINALIST

Bright Light International Film Festival



We are truly honored to share that *A Heart Full of Hope* has been awarded the esteemed **Dove Seal of Approval** (Faith and Family-Focused Reviews for Today's Media).

AN INTERVIEW WITH ACTRESS

Paulette Lamori



Lamori, who plays Anna Mae in *A Heart Full of Hope*, shares personal experiences with kidney disease and her role in the film.

Tell us about your role in *A Heart Full of Hope* and your Native American heritage.

I come from a long, proud line of Navajo and Apache. In this film, I play a grandmother, business owner, and wife to a man who, without a kidney transplant, will lose his life to kidney disease. Sometimes in life, our light can be dimmed through tragedy. This character was the light in the storm. She never gave up hope that her husband would find a kidney donor. Although her business was failing—as many do during a family tragedy of this sort—she cared deeply for her employees and vowed to do what she could for them.

What kind of impact do you think a movie like this will have on the Native American community?

A movie like this can only bring awareness to our community. Although I have a family history of kidney disease, I was not aware of how prevalent KD is on the reservation. Everyone knows someone battling kidney disease, but it doesn't always register that our community is being disproportionately affected. Quick story: my niece, a mother of four, was driving down Sunset Blvd. and saw a billboard of a woman in need of a kidney. My niece called the number and, to her surprise, was a match! So, YES—a thousand times YES—a movie like this can save the lives of many people, both on and off the reservation. People just need to see it!

Has anyone close to you ever dealt with kidney disease?

I have a cousin who is battling kidney disease right now. It started out as diabetes and then progressed into KD. She is now on dialysis four days a week and has been on the donor list for over five years. I have witnessed the pain of this horrible disease firsthand.



Tim "Thunderhorse" Halpiin and Paulette Lamori

My prayer is that more people on the reservation learn to recognize the early stages of KD and, of course, that more people become donors. There is nothing better than giving the gift of life.

Before you were cast in this film, did you know about the kidney chain?

I was not aware of the Kidney Chain. How can that be? I think, at least in my family, disease is not spoken of, not shared, and never discussed. We live—or die—through it in silence. Thank God for people like the Mendez Foundation, bringing awareness to the Indigenous community and beyond.

What other projects are you currently working on?

I recently worked on *People of the West*, and I have also been cast in the new spin-off of *Yellowstone*—*Marshals*. I am very excited, proud, and blessed to be a part of both projects.

SHOPPING EVENT A HUGE SUCCESS FOR MNITF

October's shopping event at **Zadig & Voltaire** drew a great crowd in support of the Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation—made even sweeter with Avaline Wines as our partner as guests sipped, shopped, and gave back. Not only did Zadig & Voltaire host the event, they also donated a portion of the sales to MNITF.



2025 HOLIDAY GALA HIGHLIGHTS

The 2025 MNITF Holiday Gala, held at the iconic Beverly Wilshire Hotel and produced by Suzanne DeLaurentiis Productions, was a dazzling, star-studded evening of entertainment and celebration. Hosted by actress Eva LaRue, known for *CSI: Miami* and her acclaimed work in daytime television.

The show featured a lively tap dance routine led by Disney star Garrett Clayton, a captivating hand-balancing act, and a festive finale by The Satin Dollz performing a 1940s-inspired holiday medley, which was produced by the talented Shannon Beach.

Other celebrities in attendance were Eric Roberts, Michael Paré, and Stephanie Kramer

Guests enjoyed walking the red carpet, indulging in cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, dinner, and bidding in exclusive auctions before departing with elegant gift bags. It was truly a joyful night honoring the incredible work of our foundation.



CHRIS YZAGUIRRE, NICOLE MENDEZ, ERIC CHAVES,
MICHELLE CHAVES, EVA IINO, AND JOHN IINO



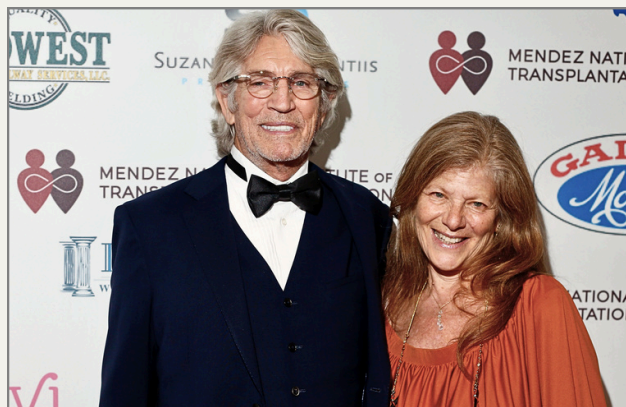
THE SATIN DOLLZ



EVA LARUE



GARRETT CLAYTON



ERIC ROBERTS AND WIFE ELIZA



A HEART FULL OF HOPE PREMIERES AT THE FINE ARTS THEATER IN BEVERLY HILLS

The spirit of the holiday season came alive on November 5th at the Fine Arts Theater in Beverly Hills as cast, crew, and special guests gathered for the red carpet premiere of *A Heart Full of Hope*, the latest uplifting film produced by the Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation (MNITF) and Suzanne DeLaurentiis Productions.

The premiere drew an enthusiastic crowd, with attendees enjoying a festive evening of holiday cheer, heartfelt storytelling, and cinematic celebration. *A Heart Full of Hope* delivers a heartfelt message of compassion, perseverance, and the gift of second chances — themes that align beautifully with MNITF's mission to advance organ donation awareness and support transplant patients and their families.

In attendance were the film's stars, Juliah Taylor, Chelsea Rose Cook, and Sebastian Armani, as well as director Dale Fabrigar, MNITF's Executive Director, Nicole Mendez, and producer Suzanne DeLaurentiis.

Guests at the premiere walked the red carpet, posed for photos, and shared warm holiday wishes as they enjoyed the debut screening. Following the film, an intimate reception, with sandwiches by Fat Sal's, cannoli by Bug & Bears, and drinks by Booze & Brews, gave attendees the chance to celebrate the production team's efforts and the film's message of perseverance and hope.



THE CAST + CREW



NICOLE MENDEZ & SUZANNE DELAURENTIIS



SEBASTIAN ARMANI

"*A Heart Full of Hope* is more than a holiday movie—it's a reminder that even in the darkest times, kindness and faith can light the way," said Nicole Mendez. "We're proud to collaborate with MNITF to highlight a message that resonates far beyond the screen and will bring awareness to the importance of living kidney donors," added Suzanne DeLaurentiis.

The film recently had success on the film festival circuit, winning at the Cannes World Film Festival, Los Angeles Film Awards, and the Accolade Global Film Competition. It was also a finalist at the Bright Light International Film Festival and official selection of the Glendale International Film Festival. *A Heart Full of Hope* is now available to watch on multiple streaming platforms.

For more information about *A Heart Full of Hope* and upcoming projects from Suzanne DeLaurentiis Productions, visit SuzanneDeLaurentiisProduction.com. To learn more about The Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation and its life-saving mission, visit MNITF.org.

RESEARCH GRANT PROGRAM: Meet Marek Nowicki & 2025 Funding Update

The Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation (MNITF) Research Grant Program (RGP) has been dedicated to advancing the science and practice of transplantation since its establishment in 2014, following a merger with the Mendez National Institute of Transplantation.

The RGP embodies the vision of MNITF co-founders Drs. Robert and Rafael Mendez, whose legacy continues through research projects that address critical needs in transplantation—from improved organ quality assessment to enhanced patient outcomes.

Since 2015, MNITF has awarded 48 grants, surpassing \$4.25 million in total funding.

The Grant Selection Process

MNITF conducts two funding cycles annually, relying on the expertise of the Research Advisory Board (RAB), which comprises six experts in various areas of transplant research. The grant proposal process involves three steps:

1. Letter of Intent (LOI):

Principal investigators submit an LOI form online. Submissions meeting eligibility criteria are reviewed and scored by the RAB based on merit, innovation, and potential to advance organ transplantation.

2. Full Application:

Applicants with the highest-ranking LOIs are invited to complete a full application, which undergoes the same rigorous evaluation process.

3. Grant Presentation:

The top three to four applicants present their projects to the RAB, providing an opportunity for questions and addressing concerns. Following these presentations, the RAB makes funding recommendations to the Board of Directors.



Marek Nowicki
Research Advisory Board Director

Meet the RAB Director

Marek Nowicki, an internationally recognized expert in persistent viral infections, serves as RAB Director. His scientific career began in 1976 as a research fellow at the Medical Academy in Poland. He later developed and applied cellular immunology assays at the Department of Microbiology at Christian Albrecht University in Germany.

In 1984, the same year French and American researchers discovered HIV, Dr. Nowicki joined the liver diseases research team studying HBV and NANB (HCV) infections at Huntington Memorial Hospital in Pasadena, California. In 1985, he joined the University of Southern California (USC), where he remained on faculty until 2013. His research encompassed transfusion-transmissible infections, the immunology of bone marrow rejection, and T-cell regulation mechanisms.

For over a decade, Dr. Nowicki has focused on transplant-transmitted infections research. He previously served as Research Director for the Viracor IBT Donor Screening Laboratory and as MNITF Director of Transplant Research. He has authored more than 100 publications and presentations at national and international scientific meetings.

Q&A with Dr. Marek Nowicki, RAB Member

How does your expertise align with MNITF's mission to advance transplantation through research and education?

I have extensive experience in teaching, study design, and research across large epidemiological studies, collaborative research, and basic science. I believe this expertise in both translational and basic research directly supports the ongoing quest to increase organ donor eligibility and improve long-term organ survival.

What do you consider the most critical challenges facing transplantation today?

The most critical issue is prevention—reducing the number of patients with preventable chronic diseases that lead to the need for organ transplantation. This is a multifactorial problem, but MNITF contributes through our outreach "edutainment" series, films, PSAs, and social media campaigns. Additionally, organ scarcity can be mitigated through proper organ allocation and improved access to post-transplant care.

What criteria do you believe are most important when evaluating transplant research proposals?

Originality and innovativeness are the key ingredients for a fundable proposal. I also prioritize supporting early-stage investigators who bring fresh perspectives to the field.

How do you assess whether a research project has the potential for "significant and immediate impact" on transplantation?

I evaluate the probability of implementation within a five-year period. Projects that can realistically translate into clinical practice in that timeframe demonstrate true potential for immediate impact.

How would you evaluate proposals that lack other funding sources—MNITF's key focus area?

I assess originality and feasibility within our approximately \$100,000 budget. I also consider whether the project will generate preliminary data that could support applications for larger grants, helping researchers build momentum in their work.

Where do you see the field of transplantation heading in the next 5-10 years?

The transplantation field will move toward better organ evaluation, post-harvest improvement, and allocation strategies. However, it's critical to work with outreach organizations and prevention programs to reduce the burden of lifestyle-related diseases like diabetes and substance abuse, which will help lower or stabilize the demand for organs and transplantation services.

What emerging areas of transplant research do you think MNITF should prioritize funding?

Prevention strategies that reduce the need for transplantation and post-transplant graft monitoring are two critical areas that deserve increased attention and resources.

How can MNITF's research program best complement larger funding sources like NIH while maintaining its unique niche?

Small, targeted grants that fund preliminary data and support "orphan" or audacious proposals represent the niche where MNITF excels. We receive a steady stream of proposals, many from the world's leading research centers, demonstrating the value of our approach to filling gaps left by larger funding agencies.

What motivates you to serve on the MNITF Research Advisory Board?

The intellectual stimulation of reading and evaluating innovative proposals keeps me engaged and curious. I also view this role as an opportunity to give back to the scientific community that has shaped my career.

What unique perspective or expertise would you bring to our Board?

My background in the epidemiology of infectious diseases and immunological responses to chronic infections provides a specialized lens for evaluating transplant research, particularly in areas related to donor screening and transplant-transmitted infections.

How important is communication between researchers and the broader transplant community?

Communication is critical. Understanding patients' needs, transplant professionals' challenges, and the evolving landscape of the field ensures that research remains relevant and responsive to real-world problems.

2025 Foundation Updates

In 2025, MNITF has awarded the following grant:

University of California, Los Angeles

Principal Investigator: Joanna Schaeffer

Awarded Amount: \$150,000

Project Title: Defining Impact of Immunosuppression on T cell Function and Epigenetics in Kidney Transplantation

Use of lymphodepleting induction therapy such as antithymocyte globulin (ATG) is a common strategy used to prevent rejection after kidney transplantation. However, its use is limited by increased frequency of infection and cancer, especially in older patients. Higher doses of maintenance immunosuppression are also associated with increased infection risk.

In this project, the Grantee aims to apply a powerful approach to dissect the impact of induction and maintenance immunosuppression at the epigenetic, gene expression, and T cell functional level to develop tools individualization of immunosuppression.

PROJECT / CAMPAIGN UPDATES



The Christmas Chain

Because it had such a successful debut in the United States in 2024, we've secured a foreign deal with:

- Scandinavian countries: Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland.
- Benelux countries: Belgium, The Netherlands, and Luxembourg.

They will be doing a Christmas release in four different languages. We feel confident that next year at this time, we will have the same luck with *A Heart Full of Hope*.

Over 12 million views since release!

This quarter, the film had 4,372,559 streams on Tubi.



Linked By Love

Linked By Love had 40,239 streams on Tubi this quarter.



Christmas Ornaments with a Cause!

Our "A Heart Full of Hope" Holiday Ornaments are Sold-Out! Thank you for purchasing!

A MATCH MADE ON CRAIGSLIST



THE FLOOD SISTERS WITH DOLLY PARTON

How one family's determination sparked a movement for Kidney Awareness

When Jennifer Flood's father was told he needed a kidney transplant in 2008, she and her sisters were determined to find a way to save his life. "We were shocked," Flood, a nurse from New York, recalls. "We had no idea what to do, but we knew we didn't want our dad to go on dialysis. My sister Heather came up with an out-of-the-box idea — let's post on Craigslist."

What started as a desperate plea turned into a remarkable story of hope. "We put up an ad with a photo of our family and all our contact information," Flood says. "We didn't even think it would work." Within days, media outlets picked up the story, and soon hundreds of strangers volunteered to be tested as potential donors. "It felt like a telethon," she remembers. "We'd come home from work, screen people, and track everything in a spreadsheet. The generosity was overwhelming."

Against all odds, a perfect match was found — a complete stranger from California. "It was incredible," says Flood. "We learned that sometimes strangers can be even better matches than family." Their father received his transplant on December 12, 2008 and recovered successfully, inspiring the sisters to create the nonprofit organization, Flood Sisters Kidney Foundation, dedicated to helping others facing kidney disease. "We realized we couldn't stop there," Flood says. "We already knew how this process worked, and we wanted to use that knowledge to help other families."

As the foundation grew, it began to draw attention and support from well-known figures in the entertainment world, including Dolly Parton and Jon Bon Jovi. Parton participated in a YouTube campaign for their foundation called "The Christmas Wish" while Bon Jovi performed at a concert to raise awareness and funds for Flood Sisters Kidney Foundation. Their involvement helped bring national attention to the cause and amplify the foundation's lifesaving mission.

Since then, the Flood sisters' foundation has facilitated 15 transplants and continues to raise awareness about living kidney donation. Currently, the sisters are working with a patient, John Cusmano of Toms River, NJ who is in need of a B or O blood-type kidney donor.

The Flood sisters' proactive approach exemplifies the message behind *A Heart Full of Hope*, a film featured in MNITF's innovative "edutainment" series. "*A Heart Full of Hope* highlights how important it is for patients to get a living donation before going on dialysis," shares MNITF's executive director, Nicole Mendez.

"Many patients aren't told that finding a living donor before dialysis is considered the optimal option. Transplants performed before dialysis often lead to better health outcomes, longer lifespans, and fewer complications. Patients are healthier, stronger, and better prepared for recovery. At MNITF, we want families to understand they can play a crucial role — just like the Flood sisters did — by being proactive and helping their loved ones find hope through living donation. In our edutainment series and films, we focus on how family members can help."

To learn more about the foundation's work and ongoing kidney awareness efforts, visit: floodsisterskidneyfnd.org.



THE FLOOD FAMILY WITH JON BON JOVI

Did You Know?

- Over 90,000 Americans are currently waiting for a kidney transplant.
- Nearly 85% of patients on the U.S. transplant waiting list need a kidney.
- Living donors can often help recipients avoid years of dialysis and lead longer, healthier lives.
- Living donor kidneys usually starts working more quickly and has less chance of rejection.
- An estimated 12 people die each day waiting for a kidney.
- Most people live full, healthy lives with one kidney. Still, it's important to maintain good overall health and take steps to protect the remaining one you have.

**Information provided by the National Kidney Association.*

WAYS TO GIVE

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.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS GIVING, PLEASE CONTACT

Nicole Mendez, Executive Director, at **(424) 358-4450** or via email at **Nicole@MNITF.org**.

BE THE REASON SOMEONE WITH END-STAGE ORGAN DISEASE GETS A SECOND CHANCE.

MAKE A TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATION OF ANY AMOUNT

There are 2 ways to give: Go to **MNITF.org** and click on the DONATE button at the bottom of every page or scan the QR code to donate by phone.



*Your generosity makes our
work possible!*

GO GREEN

Get the MNITF magazine by email: visit **MNITF.org**, tap News, then Join Our Newsletter.

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