MENDEZ NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF TRANSPLANTATION FOUNDATION

2026 ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

A YEAR OF IMPACT

The stories, science and supporters moving transplantation forward.



INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Research breakthroughs
Stories of the gift of life
The people making a difference

MAKE YOUR YEAR-END IMPACT. GIVE AT MNITF.ORG



A LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

What a year it has been! Thanks to the dedication of our partners, supporters, and team, MNITF reached significant milestones in 2026, and we are deeply grateful to each of you for standing with us in this life-saving mission.

Through our "edutainment" approach, we continue to deliver vital information about kidney disease, transplantation, living donation, and healthy living to audiences nationwide in formats that engage and inspire. This year, we:

- Launched the MNITF Magazine
- Produced six new PSAs for national TV broadcast
- Partnered on the film *Boatlift 9/11*, raising awareness of the devastating health effects caused by the debris
- Began production on a new feature film, a thriller designed to reach an entirely new audience

Education is only half of our work. Since 2015, our Research Grant Program has invested more than $4.7 million in 51 grants that are saving lives and improving outcomes for people facing end-stage organ disease. In 2027, we expect to pass $5 million in research awarded.

There is so much more we want to accomplish, and we can't do it without you. Please consider a year-end gift to MNITF. Every dollar goes directly to our research and education programs, helping more patients live longer, healthier lives.

On behalf of all of us at MNITF, thank you, and best wishes for a joyful holiday season!

With heartfelt thanks,
Nicole Mendez

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Stories That Save Lives: MNITF's Edutainment in 2026

Why Stories Work

Facts about kidney disease save lives only when people hear them, remember them, and act on them. That is why MNITF has spent more than a decade meeting audiences where they already are: in front of a screen, following a story.

In 2026, that approach reached further than ever. Three issues of MNITF Magazine, a new short film, and bilingual public service announcements carried the message of prevention, transplantation, and living donation to readers and viewers across communities most affected by kidney disease.

Where Edutainment Began

MNITF launched its Edutainment initiative in 2012. The goal was simple: use the power of entertainment to reduce disparities in kidney disease and transplantation among at-risk populations.

The initiative has produced award-winning digital series and films, including:

- *Fixing Paco*
- *Linked by Love*
- *The Christmas Chain*
- *A Heart Full of Hope*

Each one turns medical information into a story with characters audiences care about. Viewers come for the drama and leave knowing more about risk factors, transplant options, and what it means to become a living donor.

MNITF Magazine: A Breakout Year

MNITF Magazine published three issues in 2026, and reader demand outpaced what the print run could supply. Each issue paired personal stories with practical health information, featuring voices from entertainment, medicine, and the community.

The Spring issue launched in March, National Kidney Month, with a reminder that kidney disease is the ninth leading cause of death in the U.S. and affects an estimated 37 million adults, most of whom don't know it. It featured Academy Award-nominated actor Eric Roberts, a longtime MNITF supporter who appeared in *The Christmas Chain* and MNITF's newest organ donation PSA. Actor and physician Rico Simonini discussed hypertension and early screening, and post-production colorist Allen Kelly, who also worked on the PSA campaign, shared his transplant story.

The Summer issue featured actress Charlene Tilton, Dr. Qazi, and Pascal Borno. It also spotlighted *Boatlift 9/11*, a new short film co-produced with Suzanne DeLaurentiis Productions, extending MNITF's storytelling from the page to the screen.

The final 2026 issue, released September 21, featured Hank Northrop, Taj Ahmad Eldridge, and Fat Sal's. It closed the year with a letter to readers and an invitation to support MNITF's work with a donation.

The response has been strong. Readers have asked for more copies than were printed, a clear sign that health content told through real people's stories finds an audience.

PSAs That Reach Millions

In 2026, MNITF launched new English and Spanish public service announcements on kidney disease awareness, featuring spokesperson Ana Maria Canseco. Hispanic and Latino communities face higher rates of kidney disease, and messages in a viewer's own language, from a familiar and trusted face, are more likely to prompt action. Native American communities also face elevated risk, and a PSA featuring actor Wes Studi speaks directly to them.

The PSAs encourage viewers to know their risk, get screened, and learn about transplantation and organ donation. The bilingual spots are part of a larger 2026 campaign that also features actors Eric Roberts, Michael Paré, Antonio Sabato Jr., and Hank Northrop.

As of mid-October 2026, MNITF's PSAs had generated more than 17.5 million impressions through about 17,200 airings on 133 stations in 72 markets nationwide.

Looking Ahead to 2027

MNITF is building on this momentum. Plans for 2027 include a new PSA series with celebrity spokespeople, another year of MNITF Magazine, a new feature film and deeper partnerships with healthcare institutions to share content with more patients and families.







MNITF Magazine has been distributed to newsstands in San Fernando Valley, Fresenius Medical and Kidney Care Centers, Cedars Sinai Hospital, Provident St. Joseph's Hospital in Burbank, Loma Linda Hospital, Bank of America branches in North Hollywood, assorted small businesses, restaurants, and salons, as well as available digitally on MNITF.org.

BOATLIFT 9/11

A STORY OF COURAGE, COMPASSION, AND HOPE

One of the year's most anticipated independent films, *Boatlift 9/11* has been generating excitement and fittingly premiered on September 11.

Inspired by the remarkable true story of the largest maritime evacuation in American history, the film recounts the extraordinary efforts of everyday civilians who came together to rescue more than 500,000 people from Lower Manhattan in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

Following the completion of filming, the production held a week of special public screenings in Hollywood this June, giving audiences an early look at the powerful film before its red-carpet premiere on September 11, commemorating the 25th anniversary.

The film has also been generating significant media attention thanks to its accomplished cast, led by internationally acclaimed actress **Sofia Helin** *(The Bridge)* and **Hank Northrop** (*Days of Our Lives).* The film's Oscar-qualifying application has been accepted, officially making it eligible for Academy Award consideration.

Northrop, who is featured on the cover of this issue of MNITF Magazine, brings heart and authenticity to a story centered on courage, compassion, and the resilience of the human spirit.

Beyond honoring one of history's greatest civilian rescue efforts, *Boatlift 9/11* also shines a light on the long-term health consequences many 9/11 survivors continue to face—including respiratory illnesses, cancer, and kidney disease—making the film a meaningful partnership for MNITF as it continues its mission of education, awareness, and hope.

BOATLIFT 9/11 PREMIERES IN BEVERLY HILLS













Behind the Scenes of MNITF's 2026 PSAs

WATCH THE FULL PSA VIDEOS ON OUR WEBSITE AT MNITF.ORG/PSAS



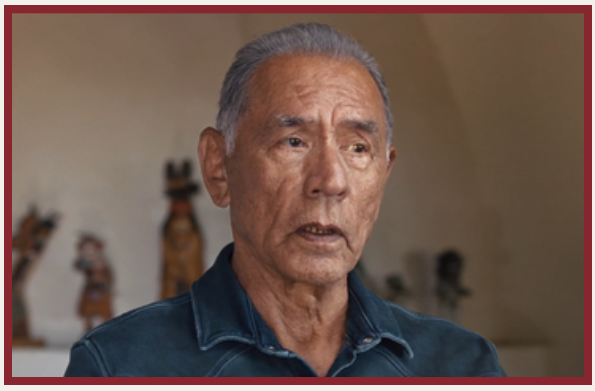
Model and actor **Antonio Sabato Jr.**



Days of Our Lives star **Hank Northrop** with director Dale Fabrigar



Telenovela actress and Univision talk show host **Ana María Canseco**



Oscar winner **Wes Studi**



Two-time Academy Award nominee **Eric Roberts**



Cult film star **Michael Paré**

FILM FESTIVAL SPOTLIGHT

Boatlift 9/11

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

Independent Shorts Awards
Best Action Short
Best Supporting Actress - *Preslea Elliott*
Best Director - *Dale Fabrigar*
Best Editing - *Radu Ion*
Best Sound Design - *Michael Huang*
Best Original Score - *Oliver Goodwill*

Top Shorts
Film of the Month
Best Narrative Film
Best Inspirational Film
Best Director - *Dale Fabrigar*
Best Actress - *Sofia Helin*
Best Editing - *Radu Ion*
Best Score - *Oliver Goodwill*

Elgin Short Film Festival
Best Picture

Stockholm City Film Festival
Best Director - *Dale Fabrigar*
Best Actress - *Sofia Helin*
Best Supporting Actress - *Preslea Elliott*

Los Angeles Film Awards (LAFA)
Best Narrative Film
Best Director - *Dale Fabrigar*
Best Acting Duo - *Sofia Helin & Preslea Elliott*
Best Editing - *Radu Ion*

New York Shorts International Film Festival
Finalist

Indie Short Festival
Finalist

City of Angels Film Festival
Official Selection

Oniros Film Awards
Best Short Film
Best Director - *Dale Fabrigar*
Best Editing - *Radu Ion*



FRFF FRENCH RIVIERA FILM FESTIVAL 2026

FRFF FRENCH RIVIERA FILM FESTIVAL SPECIAL MENTION 2026

FRFF FRENCH RIVIERA FILM FESTIVAL FINALIST 2026

Congratulations to our production team for winning Special Mention Honor for the **"HOLIDAY"** Music Video (Theme Song from ***A Heart Full of Hope***) at the **French Riviera Film Festival** in Cannes.

"Edutainment" Film Updates



The Christmas Chain

The Christmas Chain has received 6,129,283 views on Tubi and 6,800,000 views on additional platforms for a total of 12,929,283 views.



A Heart Full of Hope

A Heart Full of Hope has received 1,646,954 views on Tubi and 453,046 views on additional platforms for a total of 2.1 million views.

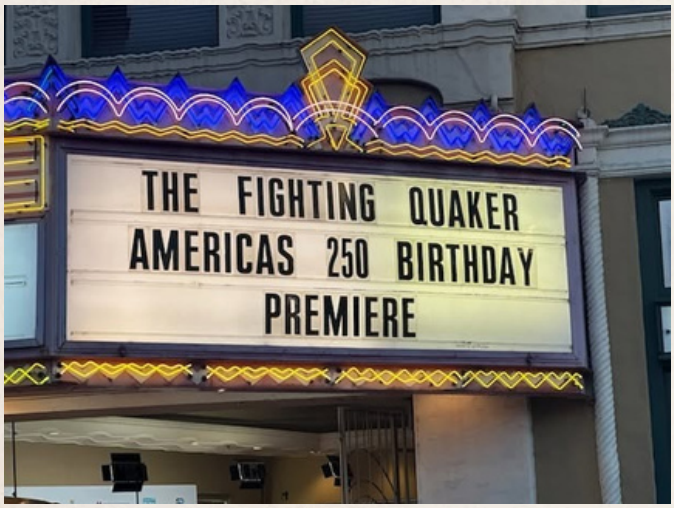


Linked By Love

Linked By Love has received 134,737 views on Tubi and 66,000 views on additional platforms for a total of 200,737 views.

Both *A Heart Full of Hope* and *The Christmas Chain* are now available on DVD!

The Fighting Quaker Raised Funds for Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation in Successful Benefit Evening at El Portal Theater



One-Night Theatrical Event Celebrating America's 250th Anniversary Draws Enthusiastic Crowd to North Hollywood

Producers Suzanne Matlack DeLaurentiis and Dale Fabrigar celebrated a triumphant one-night run of The Fighting Quaker on Thursday, June 4, 2026, at the El Portal Theater in North Hollywood, CA. The theatrical benefit — staged in honor of America's 250th anniversary — drew an enthusiastic full-house audience and raised funds for the Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation (MNITF), which advances research, education, and awareness around kidney disease and organ donation.

Guests arrived to a festive lobby reception beginning at 6:00 p.m., where a generous spread from Fat Sal's — including options for every dietary need — and a trio of beverage stations set a celebratory tone before the performance.

Written by the late Ann Matlack DeLaurentiis and Tricia Aurand and directed by Bryan Rasmussen, the drama brought to life the largely forgotten story of Timothy Matlack, the man who hand-inscribed the official copy of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 on the recommendation of Benjamin Franklin. The production featured a striking digital backdrop that, according to attendees, added considerable visual clarity to the historical narrative.

"I hope we can inspire audiences not only to reflect on our nation's history but also reconnect with this simple, powerful act of writing," said producer Suzanne Matlack DeLaurentiis, herself a descendant of Timothy Matlack and the daughter of the play's original playwright, who first staged the drama in 1968. The production's message resonated strongly with the crowd, drawing attention to both Matlack's remarkable journey — from debtor's prison to the halls of the Second Continental Congress — and the enduring significance of the handwritten word.

Following the performance, guests returned to the lobby for themed cake and cookies before VIP attendees gathered in one of El Portal's smaller theaters to receive gift bags that included pashminas, neckties, and curated product samples. The evening concluded with cast members greeting guests outside the theater for photos and conversation — a warm finale to what proved to be a memorable multi-part event.

All proceeds benefited the Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation.



The cast of The Fighting Quaker with MNITF's Nicole Mendez backstage at the El Portal Theater.

Style with a Purpose: Zadig&Voltaire Supports MNITF



On October 29, MNITF partnered with Zadig&Voltaire for an evening of sips, shopping, and styling at its Beverly Hills boutique, with beverage partner Avaline.

Guests enjoyed 10% off their purchases, with a portion of sales benefiting MNITF.

Supporters also had the opportunity to participate through private shopping appointments from October 24 through November 8.

Thank you to Zadig&Voltaire, Avaline, and everyone who shopped in support of advancing organ transplantation through research, education, and innovation!





Receiving the Gift of Life: Reflections on a Liver Transplant Journey

By Michelle Chaves



The Chaves Family

I remember the day Eric received his diagnosis with extraordinary clarity and angst: February 15, 2025, at 7:15 p.m. Earlier that day, he had undergone routine annual blood work. That very evening, the hospital called and instructed him to go immediately to the emergency department because his liver was failing. Eric had shown little indication of how serious his condition had become. His doctors told us he was very critical and would need a liver transplant, and in that moment, our fight to get him on a waiting list began. We later learned that Eric has alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency, a genetic condition that can lead to liver inflammation, scarring, and ultimately liver failure, often with few noticeable symptoms.

Through my years with MNITF, I knew that end-stage organ disease brings profound uncertainty. Living it showed me just how daunting the road to a transplant can be. Qualifying required extensive testing, and advocating for Eric quickly became our full-time job. Each evaluation meant three to four days of examinations and consultations with psychiatric and transplant specialists. He was evaluated at Cedars-Sinai and Keck Medicine of USC in California and at Mayo Clinic in Phoenix and Rochester, yet even as his condition worsened, none of those centers listed him. His MELD score did not meet their criteria at the time in California.

With the help of Dr. Ed Krauss of the kidney transplant division at Johns Hopkins, Eric was evaluated and finally placed on the waiting list. We traveled to Baltimore with only a few changes of clothes, expecting just another evaluation. Instead, his doctors saw how ill he had become and admitted him immediately. By a miracle, within days, he received his first donor liver.

A week later, Eric developed a blood clot and urgently needed a second liver. He returned to the top of the list, and the next four days were beyond agonizing. Surrounded by his parents and siblings, we waited in his hospital room, hoping that every time the door opened, someone would bring good news. Finally, four long days later, another liver became available. The second transplant was successful. Looking back, I recognize how fortunate we were that events moved as quickly as they did. We were truly blessed.

Recovery demanded meticulous, around-the-clock care. Our dear friends John and Eva Iino helped us find an apartment near the hospital, and with our children in college, I was able to stay by Eric's side. We followed a precise schedule of medications and injections and monitored his hydration, nutrition, weight, blood pressure, and fluid retention. He worked through physical, occupational, and speech therapy. Today he takes daily anti-rejection medication, has weekly blood tests, and meets regularly with his doctors—a small price to pay for the gift of life.

For families beginning a similar journey, I offer three lessons. First, share the diagnosis. You will need love and support, and you never know who may have a helpful connection. Second, seek multiple medical opinions; transplant centers follow different criteria, and if one path closes, keep asking. Finally, be an informed, persistent advocate.



During Eric's recovery, he experienced severe confusion and disorientation. I suspected confusion was due to one of his anti-rejection medications. After desperately pleading, his transplant team finally switched his medication and his mental clarity improved dramatically. Had I not insisted on this change, who knows how long Eric would have remained severely disoriented.

Our experience has transformed the meaning of my work with MNITF. Its mission is now deeply personal. Eric's disease was discovered only through routine blood work, and his path to transplant required persistence and resources that many families do not have. That is why MNITF's work matters so much: its educational films and outreach help families recognize kidney and liver disease, understand dialysis, evaluations, waiting lists, and how to advocate for themselves. Its promotion of end-stage disease prevention and organ donation, and its support for groundbreaking research, has improved and save many lives.

Above all, we will be forever grateful to the donors and donor families whose generosity gave Eric another chance at life. He is my loving husband, a devoted father to our children, EJ and Capri, a cherished son and brother, and a dear friend to so many. One person's gift really can change countless lives.

THE MNITF RESEARCH GRANT PROGRAM
Advancing transplantation through research

For patients waiting for an organ transplant and those living with one, better outcomes depend on research that can move from the laboratory into clinical care. The Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation (MNITF) Research Grant Program supports that work, carrying forward the vision of its co-founders, Drs. Rafael and Robert Mendez.

The program funds research addressing critical needs in transplantation, from assessing donated organs to improving long-term outcomes for recipients.

More than a decade of impact

Since 2015, MNITF has awarded 51 research grants totaling more than $4.7 million, supporting investigators at leading transplant centers in the United States and around the world. Their findings have been shared through more than 80 publications, presentations, and abstracts, contributing to the knowledge that researchers and clinicians use to advance patient care.

Choosing research with a path to patient care

MNITF holds two funding cycles each year. Applications are evaluated by its Research Advisory Board, a group of six experts with specialties spanning immunology, virology, organ regeneration, and other areas of transplant research. The board looks for original, innovative proposals with the potential to save and improve lives and a realistic path into patient care.

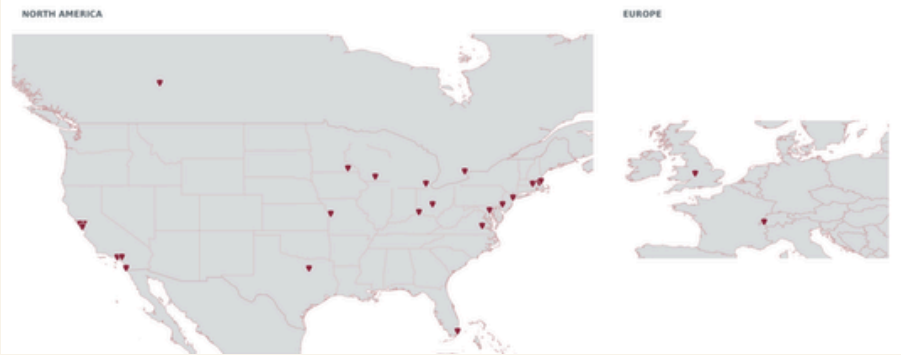
Supporting ideas that need a start

The foundation directs funding toward promising work that may struggle to secure support elsewhere. Grants can provide the resources investigators need to test an idea and collect preliminary data for larger awards from federal agencies and major foundations. That early investment can help establish research programs that extend far beyond the initial grant.

The program also creates opportunities for young investigators to develop into experienced leaders, helping sustain the next generation of transplantation research.

The 2026 grant awards featured on pages 17–19 reflect that purpose: helping clinicians make better use of donated organs, detect complications earlier, and understand how to protect a transplant over time.

51 FUNDED GRANTS | OVER $4.7 MILLION



1 Viracor-IBT Laboratories, Los Angeles, CA

2 Viracor-IBT Laboratories, Los Angeles, CA

3 Donor Network West, San Ramon, CA

4 The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH

4a University of Massachusetts Medical School, Worcester, MA

5 Viracor-IBT Laboratories, Los Angeles, CA

6 John Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD

7 Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA

8 Massachusetts General Hospital/ Harvard Stem Cell Institute, Boston, MA

9 Western University of Health Sciences, Pomona, CA

10 Viracor-IBT Laboratories, Lee's Summit, MO

11 University of Miami, Miami, FL

12 Joan & Sanford I Weill Medical College of Cornell University, New York, NY

13 Viracor-IBT Laboratories, Los Angeles, CA

14 The Scripps Research Institute, La Jolla, CA

15 University of Alberta, Edmonton, Edmonton, Canada

16 Brigham & Women's Hospital, Boston, MA

17 University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, CA

18 Massachusetts General Hospital/ Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA

19 Cornell University, New York, NY

20 University of Alberta, Edmonton/Alberta Transplant Applied Genomics Center, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

21 UCSF, San Francisco, CA

22 UCLA - David Geffen School of Medicine, Los Angeles, CA

23 Centre Hospitalier Univeritaire Vaudois, Lausanne, Lausanne, Vaud, Switzerland

24 Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science, Los Angeles, CA

25 IVIVA Medical Inc., Beverly, MA

26 University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA

27 Brigham & Women's Hospital, Boston, MA

28 United Network for Organ Sharing, Richmond, VA

29 Columbia University, New York, NY

30 Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA

31 University of Alberta, Edmonton/ Alberta Applied Transplant Genomics Center, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

32 University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, CA

33 IVIVA Medical, Inc., Beverly, MA

34 Columbia University Medical Center, New York, NY

35 Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA

36 University of Alberta, Edmonton/ Alberta Applied Transplant Genomics Center, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

37 University Health Network, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

38 NYU Grossman School of Medicine, New York, NY

39 Icahn School of Medicine, New York, NY

40 University of Wisconsin, Madison, Madison, WI

41 The Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

42 The Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN

43 Brigham & Women's Hospital, Boston, MA

44 University Health Network, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

45 The University of Birmingham, Birmingham, West Midlands, UK

46 University of Michigan, Shea Research Group, Ann Arbor, MI

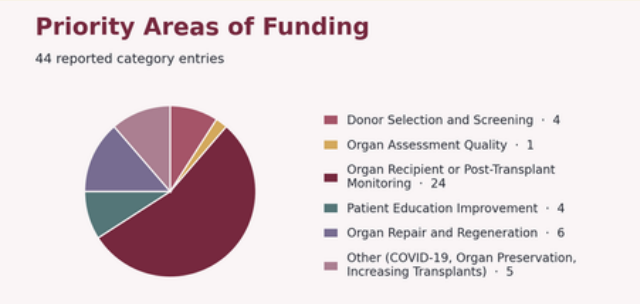
47 Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, Cincinnati, OH

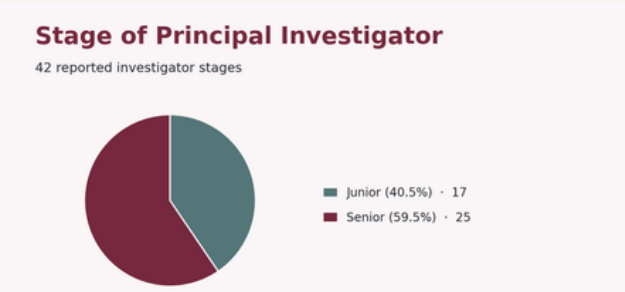
48 University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA

49 University of Alberta, Edmonton, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

50 University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas, TX

51 Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA





2026 RESEARCH GRANTS

Alberta Transplant Applied Genomics
University of Alberta, Edmonton

Project Title: Molecular predictors of post-transplant function of deceased donor kidney and heart transplant

Awarded: $150,000 in March 2026

Project Summary

Predicting How Well a Donated Kidney or Heart Will Work

When an older donor passes away, transplant teams have only hours to decide whether a kidney or heart is healthy enough to use. Current risk scores aren't very accurate, so many organs that could have helped someone are discarded while patients wait on transplant lists.

This project aims to change that. Researchers will take a tiny tissue sample, called a "Zero Hour Biopsy," from donated kidneys and hearts when they are removed. They will then study which genes are switched on or off in the cells, a molecular fingerprint that reveals injury and aging invisible under a microscope. Using MMDx, a machine-learning system already trained on thousands of transplant biopsies, they will compare these fingerprints with how each organ performs after transplant.

The team will also compare transplanted organs with discarded ones. They expect many discarded organs to look much like transplanted organs that went on to work well, though they may also find true warning signs, such as long-term scarring, that justify a discard.

Either way, the results should mean fewer wasted organs. The study may produce a reliable tool to guide transplant decisions, or it may show that most older organs work well regardless of current risk scores. Each organ would also come with a molecular "report card" to help doctors tell normal donor-related injury apart from dysfunction or failure in the first weeks after transplant. The aim is to help doctors recognize which organs still have a chance to save a life and which are too damaged to use.

The goal: more second chances at life from organs that are too often thrown away.

Meet the Principal Investigator: Philip Halloran, MD, PhD



For Philip Halloran, the need to improve transplantation became clear while he was still a medical student.

He recalled: "As a medical student many years ago, I saw people my age who were facing death because of organ failure. It seemed to me that transplantation was a way to give these people the possibility of long and healthy lives if the problems such as graft rejection and injury could be understood and solved."

His research now challenges how transplant teams decide which organs to use. He hopes it will help more patients receive a transplant.

Halloran said: "In other words, our goal is that many more organs currently being discarded will be transplanted with good results."

2026 RESEARCH GRANTS

University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center

Project Title: Defining the Burden of HHV-8 in Organ Donation: Prevalence and Risk Factors

Awarded: $150,000 in March 2026

Project Summary

Understanding HHV-8 in Organ Donation: How Common It Is and Who Is at Risk:

Human herpesvirus 8 (HHV-8) is a virus that usually causes no symptoms in people with healthy immune systems. After infection, it can remain in the body in an inactive state. Transplant recipients take medicines that weaken their immune system to prevent rejection of their donated organ. This can allow an existing HHV-8 infection to become active or make a newly acquired infection more dangerous. In some recipients, HHV-8 can cause serious illness, including a cancer called Kaposi sarcoma and an inflammatory condition called KICS. The virus can also pass from a donor to a recipient through a transplanted organ, but how common it is among deceased organ donors in the United States remains poorly understood.

Over two years, researchers will partner with seven organ procurement organizations—groups that coordinate organ donation—across the United States to collect blood and saliva samples from deceased donors. Laboratory tests will look for antibodies, which indicate prior infection, and genetic material from the virus in these samples. By linking these findings with national organ donation and transplant data, the team will identify characteristics associated with HHV-8 infection among donors.
The findings could help guide future testing and monitoring strategies, reduce the risk of HHV-8-related illness in transplant recipients, and support the safe use of donated organs.

Meet the Principal Investigator: Ricardo La Hoz, MD

As a transplant infectious diseases physician, Ricardo La Hoz sees how infection can threaten a recipient's recovery. His commitment to research is rooted in the trust patients place in their care teams.
He said: "Transplant candidates come to us at one of the most vulnerable times in their lives, placing tremendous trust in the teams caring for them. What draws me to transplantation research is the opportunity to honor that trust by making transplantation safer and helping patients fully benefit from a life-changing gift."



The MNITF grant will also help the team pursue a larger research effort.
La Hoz explained: "It will also generate preliminary data for an NIH grant application aimed at deepening our understanding of HHV-8 in people who receive solid organ transplants. This support lays the groundwork for a broader research effort to prevent serious complications and improve outcomes after transplantation."

2026 RESEARCH GRANTS

Stanford University

Project Title: CD300a as an Early Biomarker for Epstein Barr Virus+ Post-Transplant Lymphoproliferative Disease

Awarded: $150,000 in October 2026

Project Summary

An Early Warning Sign for Cancer After Transplant

Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) is a very common virus. Most people carry it without ever knowing. In transplant recipients, whose immune systems are less active by medication to protect their new organ, EBV can cause a type of white blood cell called a B cell to grow out of control and turn into lymphoma. This cancer is known as post-transplant lymphoproliferative disease, or PTLD. When it's caught early, it can often be reversed, but right now there's no blood test that can spot it before symptoms appear.

The research team discovered a protein called CD300a that marks the B cells in EBV-related lymphomas. In this study, they will look back at blood samples from kidney, liver, heart, and intestine transplant recipients, taken before any were diagnosed, to see whether those who later developed PTLD had more of these marked cells than similar patients who stayed healthy. They will also examine tumor tissue to confirm the protein appears in the cancer itself.

If CD300a proves to be a reliable early warning sign, a simple blood test could help doctors find PTLD sooner, start treatment earlier, and save the lives of more transplant recipients.

Meet the Principal Investigator: Olivia Martinez, PhD



Olivia Martinez trained in basic immunology, studying how the immune system works. Transplantation offers a way to investigate a fundamental question: how the body distinguishes its own tissue from something foreign.
She said: "While organ transplantation has been transformative in medicine there is still unrealized potential which I believe can be unlocked by unraveling more about the way the immune system works."

With MNITF's support, her team can explore whether a laboratory discovery could improve monitoring and early diagnosis for transplant recipients.
Martinez explained: "The MNITF grant allows us to apply our laboratory findings to important questions relevant to the transplant population."

If the study demonstrates that CD300a is an early and specific marker for EBV-related PTLD, the team hopes to develop a simple, rapid test to screen patients at risk.

IN MEMORY OF BIL GALLIO: A LIFE OF GENEROSITY AND A LEGACY OF HOPE

For William “Bil” Gallio, helping someone in need didn’t require a second thought.

His wife, Karen, recalls a time when Bil encountered a stranger who was running late for work. Without knowing the man or where he was going, Bil handed him the keys to the family Jeep.
“He had no plan for getting it back,” Karen said. “All he knew was that someone needed help, and he was in a position to help.”

That generosity shaped Bil’s relationships with family and friends, as well as his decades of service to the transplant community. A two-time kidney transplant recipient and longtime board member of the Mendez National Institute of Transplantation Foundation (MNITF), Bil understood what the gift of life could mean—not only to a patient, but to an entire family.

A Gift of More Time

Bil received his first kidney transplant from a deceased donor in 1985. The gift gave him years to watch his daughters grow up, graduate, build careers, marry, and begin families of their own.

In 2004, when Bil needed another transplant, his daughter, Timery, became his living kidney donor.

“People have often told me what an incredible gift that was, but the truth is...the greatest gift wasn’t what I gave him,” Timery said. “It was the 22 more years I got to spend with my dad.”

Those years brought more birthdays, holidays, conversations, and laughter. They also gave Bil the opportunity to watch his grandchildren grow up.

“He LOVED being a Papa,” Timery said. “My dad thought I was his hero for giving him 22 more years, but he was my hero!”

Karen remembers how seriously Bil took the responsibility of caring for both donated kidneys. Timery’s kidney, she said, became his “pride and joy” and continued to function until the end of his life.



For Bil and Karen, transplantation was a family experience—one that brought uncertainty and challenges, but also hope and gratitude.

“We knew how much hope a transplant could bring, not just to the person receiving it, but to everyone who loved them,” Karen said.

An Advocate for Transplant Patients

Having experienced the wait for a kidney himself, Bil brought a patient’s perspective to his work with MNITF. He served on its board for decades, having joined before 1995 and retiring in March 2026. In 2009, Bil was honored at the 25th anniversary of the National Transplant Institute, which would later merge with MNITF.

“Bil’s greatest contribution to our work was the perspective he carried as a transplant recipient,” said Justin Dooley, chairman of the board. “He knew firsthand what it meant to wait for a kidney, and he pushed back against the pursuit of the perfect organ, which slows the whole system down.”

According to Justin, Bil’s perspective influenced the organization’s advocacy and the philosophy shared with transplant professionals in training.



Bil with Karen and their daughters—Timery & Mindee



Bil and his wife, Karen

Bil was also a trusted advisor whose business experience helped guide the organization. He worked with Justin on building the lab business and offered counsel when the labs were sold and the Foundation was established.

"Bil had a wonderful sense of humor and a pragmatic way of seeing the world," Justin said. "He made the world better, and he made the people around him better."

Karen also found a way to give back through Miracle Works, a fundraising affiliate group. Together, she and Bil supported a cause that had profoundly touched their family.

"It meant so much to us to be able to give back to a community that had given our family so much," she said.

A Life Filled with Love and Adventure

Born on June 17, 1946, in Oxnard, California, Bil grew up alongside his identical twin brother, Bob, and their siblings, Larry and Pat. After contracting polio at age seven, he faced physical challenges throughout his life, but those who loved him remember his determination and positive outlook.

Bil and Bob learned their family's trash business from the ground up and eventually took it over, growing the company before its sale in 1996. Bil became a respected leader in the solid waste industry, earning a Distinguished Service Award in 1993 and induction into the National Solid Waste Management Association Hall of Fame in 1995.

Outside of work and advocacy, Bil loved travel, classic cars, fast boats, and spending time with the people closest to him. He was also a patient teacher, as Timery discovered when she told him she wanted to learn to drive a motorhome. The next day, Bil arrived with his 42-foot motorhome and encouraged her to get behind the wheel. Although she was nervous, he calmly guided her through the drive. Before long, Timery felt confident enough to take a motorhome of her own to the Grand Canyon.

"He was always so patient in teaching me how to do anything," she said.

Above all, Bil cherished his family. Timery hopes he will be remembered for his devotion to Karen, his wife of 57 years, and for the kindness and unconditional love he showed his daughters, grandchildren, and friends.

"He was a living example of the blessing that organ donation gives families," she said.

Bil's story continues in the people he loved, the patients he advocated for, and the transplant community he helped strengthen. His family is grateful for every additional year they shared—and for the opportunity to help other families find hope and more time together.

MNITF Welcomes Eva Iino to Its Board of Directors



Eva Iino brings more than 35 years of executive and operations experience to the MNITF Board of Directors, along with a personal commitment to helping patients and families navigate transplantation. For her, joining the foundation is an opportunity to put both her professional skills and her life experiences to work.

Last year, Iino watched a close friend come dangerously close to losing his life while waiting for a critical liver transplant. His family traveled from hospital to hospital across the country, trying to get him onto a transplant list. Witnessing that experience gave her a deeper understanding of the uncertainty families face and the importance of having support throughout the process.

“I learned a lot through that whole process,” Iino said. “Now, I want to use that experience to support MNITF’s mission of educating patients and their loved ones.”

Her connection to the foundation’s mission also stems from her own experience. Nearly 22 years ago, Iino survived a near-death event that changed how she thought about her future and her responsibility to others.

“Back then, I vowed that since I was given a second chance at life, I would do everything I could to pay it forward and do good by it,” she said.

That commitment accompanies a career built around managing complex operations, developing teams, and turning strategy into action. At UPS, Iino served as Regional Industrial Engineering Manager before beginning a long tenure at FedEx in 1995. As Executive Operations Administration Manager, she oversaw industrial engineering for airport operations across 13 western states, with responsibilities spanning workforce performance, service delivery, financial accountability, and safety.

During her time at FedEx, Iino twice received the Five Star Award, the company’s highest individual honor, recognizing exceptional performance, innovation, and teamwork.

She later served as President and Chief Executive Officer of Chenco Engineering from February 2023 to February 2026, leading strategy, operations, and financial performance. She holds a bachelor’s degree in Information Systems from California State University, Los Angeles.

Iino also brings experience in community engagement and board service. Since September 2024, she has served on the USC Associates Board of Directors, supporting governance, strategic priorities, advancement initiatives, and fundraising. Earlier, she held membership and assistant secretary roles with the Pacific Palisades Women’s Club.

At MNITF, her background in operations, financial oversight, and organizational leadership will inform her service as the foundation continues its work in patient education and transplant research.

Alongside her interest in helping patients understand their options, Iino is particularly drawn to MNITF’s research grant program and its support for early-career scientists. She sees that investment as an opportunity to advance technologies that could help keep patients alive and improve their quality of life.

Looking ahead to 2027, she hopes to see researchers explore collaboration across disciplines.

“My real hope is to see our early-career scientists teaming up with AI specialists,” Iino said.

She believes artificial intelligence could help accelerate discoveries that benefit kidney patients. That possibility is part of what motivates her involvement: supporting scientists today whose work may shape care in the years ahead.

For Iino, board service offers a way to fulfill the promise she made after her own second chance at life. Through MNITF, she hopes to help families find the information they need and support research that could give more patients a future to look forward to.

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