

Media Contact: Rachel Donihoo
214-648-3404
rachel.donihoo@utsouthwestern.edu

Wagner family gift supports neurofibromatosis care, cardiothoracic surgery at UT Southwestern

DALLAS – July 12, 2006 – Mark and Suzanne Wagner of Celina have donated \$200,000 to aid the research of Dr. Michael DiMaio at UT Southwestern Medical Center into new cardiovascular surgical interventions for neurofibromatosis, a genetic disorder that causes tumors to form along the nerves.

The gift, made to Southwestern Medical Foundation as part of the medical center's \$500 million *Innovations in Medicine* campaign, will create the Elisabeth Reed Wagner Fund for Research and Clinical Care in Neurofibromatosis and Cardiothoracic Surgery.

A portion of the gift also will help fund renovations and equipment purchases for the Heart, Lung, and Vascular Clinical Center at UT Southwestern University Hospital – St. Paul.

The Wagners have three children, one of whom, Elisabeth, battled neurofibromatosis for most of her life. She died in 2002 at the age of 21.

"This was really all about doing something in Elisabeth's memory and something for her doctors who went out of their way to help us and to help her," Mr. Wagner said. "We wanted to help support Dr. DiMaio's research with this gift."

He said the family felt particularly close to Dr. DiMaio, associate professor of cardiovascular and thoracic surgery and holder of the Laurence and Susan Hirsch/Centex Distinguished Chair in Heart Disease.

"He was the doctor we leaned on," Mr. Wagner said.

Along with dozens of other UT Southwestern and community physicians, Dr. DiMaio works out of the Heart, Lung and Vascular Clinical Center, a collaborative effort combining – in one location – clinical and surgical expertise related to cardiac, pulmonary and vascular care.

"The Wagner family's generosity will play a crucial role in helping UT Southwestern create innovative ways to care for our patients," said Dr. Kern Wildenthal, president of the medical center. "What they are doing in honor of their daughter will help countless future patients."

Elisabeth was born April 23, 1980, in Temple. Her struggle inspired country music artist Billy Gilman to perform a song called *Elisabeth*, at the State Fair of Texas in 2001. A 1998 graduate of Plano Senior High School, she also was a talented dancer and a member of the Plano Dance Force.

“When she developed a tumor in her chest, Dr. DiMaio performed her surgery, and he went out of his way to help Elisabeth with the process,” Mr. Wagner said. “We hope this gift can create new opportunities for the treatment of neurofibromatosis.”

Elisabeth enrolled at Texas A&M University in the fall of 1998. She was an elementary education major and joined the Pi Beta Phi sorority. She was forced to put her studies on hold when her tumors became malignant.

Mr. Wagner is president of the Dallas-based Republic Property Group – a real estate development company. He graduated from the University of Texas at Austin in 1974 with a degree in business.

Mrs. Wagner also graduated from the University of Texas at Austin in 1974 with a degree in education. She is involved with her church, St. Andrews Methodist Church in Plano, and has been active with the Texas Neurofibromatosis Foundation.

The Wagner’s surviving children are Catherine and Richard. The family has lived in Celina for the last five years.

Mr. Wagner noted that Richard, a student at the University of Oklahoma, is a pre-med major and is doing intern work this summer with Dr. DiMaio.

“We are pleased to receive such wonderful support for research into illnesses such as neurofibromatosis,” said W. Plack Carr Jr., president of the Southwestern Medical Foundation. “It is our hope that we can improve care and treatment for patients afflicted by this disease.”

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