Michael and Paula Jennings Pledge $2 Million to Establish Endowed Chair and Endowed Scholarship

LITTLE ROCK — Michael L. Jennings, Ph.D., and Paula M. Jennings, M.A., pledged $1 million to create the Michael and Paula Jennings Endowed Chair in Physiology in the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) College of Medicine’s Department of Physiology and Cell Biology, and $1 million in additional support for the Dr. Michael and Paula Jennings Distinguished Scholarship in the College of Medicine.

“For close to 30 years, Michael and Paula Jennings have been committed to all three of UAMS’ mission areas — health care, education and research,” said Cam Patterson, M.D., MBA, UAMS chancellor and CEO of UAMS Health. “I was humbled to hear that the Jennings have chosen to continue serving UAMS in a philanthropic role. UAMS is certainly grateful for their service, leadership and generosity.”

The holder of the Michael and Paula Jennings Endowed Chair in Physiology will be a faculty member in the Department of Physiology and Cell Biology who is selected by the chair of the department and approved by the dean of the College of Medicine.

“The power of endowments became obvious to me over my career, and when I arrived at UAMS, there weren’t too many endowed chairs or professorships, especially in the basic sciences,” said Michael Jennings. “I hope that this chair will be a tool to help recruit talented faculty and provide them with the resources they need to elevate the UAMS College of Medicine.”

Created in 2018, the Dr. Michael and Paula Jennings Distinguished Scholarship will be renamed the Dr. Michael Jennings and Paula Jennings Chancellor’s Scholarship when the pledged gift raises the endowed level to $1 million. It is awarded to a medical student entering their third year in the College of Medicine. The recipient is chosen each academic year based on financial need and experience or an interest in medical or health-related research, as determined by the College of Medicine Scholarship Committee.
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“I would not have been able to attend college without scholarship help, so we are very aware of the importance of financial aid, and I am grateful for the help I received,” said Paula Jennings. “Medical school is very expensive, and it is common for students to take on debt. Providing financial assistance eases the burden for students and may give them more flexibility in choosing their area of medicine without being driven by salary needs.”

Michael Jennings, who was raised in northeastern Ohio, graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a bachelor’s degree in physics in 1970. He received a doctorate in biophysics from Harvard University in 1976. He then completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the Max Planck Institute of Biophysics in Frankfurt, Germany. He worked as an assistant professor and then associate professor at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. In 1987, he accepted a position as professor in the Department of Physiology and Biophysics at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston.

In 1995, Jennings joined UAMS as the chair of the Department of Physiology and Biophysics and held the position for 25 years, during which he directed an NIH-funded research program in cell membrane physiology. He continues to be active as a teacher of medical and graduate students. He received the College of Medicine Master Teacher award in 2018. In addition to his role as a professor, he served as interim dean of the Graduate School, executive associate dean for Basic Sciences in the College of Medicine and held the Chair in Sciences Basic to Medicine from 2012 to 2017.

“Being the chair of the Department of Physiology and Biophysics was my dream job. I always wanted a position where I could recruit new professors, help them develop, and I believe I’ve improved how we teach medical students,” said Jennings. “Because of all the great experiences we’ve had at UAMS, we wanted to show our gratitude by giving back to the university.”

Paula Jennings, who was raised in Swampscott, Massachusetts, received a bachelor’s degree in sociology from Simmons College in Boston and a master’s degree in educational counseling from Boston College. She worked in various administrative roles at Harvard Medical School, where she and Michael Jennings met, the Max Planck Institute and the University of Iowa. At the University of Texas Medical Branch, she coordinated an intramural faculty research grant program.

Paula Jennings is a member of the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute Auxiliary and has served on its board for more than 25 years as its magazine editor and secretary. She has served on the Cancer Institute Auxiliary’s Cooks Tour and Partners Card fundraising committee and currently serves on its grant awards committee. In 2000, she was named the Cancer Institute Volunteer of the Year. She was also a member of the UAMS Auxiliary, serving on its board, and she has volunteered in the UAMS Hospital Gift Shop.
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“It has been a pleasure knowing and working with Mike and Paula through the years, and I am grateful for their longtime support of our college,” said G. Richard Smith, M.D., a distinguished professor of psychiatry and the interim dean of the College of Medicine and UAMS executive vice chancellor. “The legacy they are building through their scholarship, the endowed chair they are establishing, and other initiatives is impactful. We are grateful for their help in generating the next generation of world-class physicians and scientists.”

UAMS is the state’s only health sciences university, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; a hospital; a main campus in Little Rock; a Northwest Arkansas regional campus in Fayetteville; a statewide network of regional campuses; and seven institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, Psychiatric Research Institute, Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging, Translational Research Institute and Institute for Digital Health & Innovation. UAMS includes UAMS Health, a statewide health system that encompasses all of UAMS’ clinical enterprise. UAMS is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. UAMS has 3,275 students, 890 medical residents and fellows, and five dental residents. It is the state’s largest public employer with more than 12,000 employees, including 1,200 physicians who provide care to patients at UAMS, its regional campuses, Arkansas Children’s, the VA Medical Center and Baptist Health. Visit www.uams.edu or www.uamshealth.com. Find us on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube or Instagram.

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