Ann Dobbie was the Queen of Hearts.

A beloved wife, mother of four and grandmother of 12, her zest for life, kindness and legendary Thanksgiving and Christmas feasts at her Newport Beach home made her the undisputed center of her family’s universe, “the glue that held us together,” in the words of her daughter, Kim Beaudette.

Ann, once a paragon of good health, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in the summer of 1999. Just five months later, she died from the virulent disease on Christmas Day.

Her three daughters, who considered their mother as much a friend as a parent, went numb. Then they decided to honor her memory. In 2000, sisters Beaudette, Cathy Greinke and Lori Hunter founded the Queen of Hearts Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to funding ovarian cancer research and education. The foundation, through its sponsorship of tennis tournaments, galas and other events, has raised almost $1 million to date, with about half that money going to UC Irvine.

Queen of Hearts’ grants have funded ovarian cancer research by Drs. Wendy Brewster and Robert Burger, both distinguished UC Irvine professors. Foundation money has also gone to support a new lab at Sprague Hall that, when completed, will bear the name Queen of Hearts Ovarian Cancer Research Laboratory.

Beaudette, president of the Queen of Hearts, said the knowledge, compassion and dedication of UC Irvine cancer specialists led the trio to choose the university as the main recipient of foundation funds.

“UC Irvine is the best kept secret in Orange County,” she said. “If I needed specialized medical care, I would definitely choose UC Irvine.”
Department of Ophthalmology

In July, the Department of Ophthalmology received its largest gift ever when Gavin S. Herbert made a $10 million contribution. Herbert, founder and former chief executive of Allergan Inc., an Irvine-based maker of eye care and other pharmaceutical products, including Botox, has generously supported the Ophthalmology Department for more than 30 years. In 1975, he helped recruit its first chair, the late Dr. Irving H. Leopold, a distinguished ophthalmologist.

Cancer

In June, Assistant Professor of Clinical Surgery Karen Lane, M.D., started the Breast Center High-Risk Clinic. The center offers physical examinations and genetic testing for women at risk of developing breast cancer, including those with family histories of the disease. The high risk clinic operates Thursdays from 9 a.m. — noon. To schedule an appointment, please call 714.456.6621.

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Between seeing cancer patients, doing research and fulfilling his administrative responsibilities, Dr. Frank Meyskens Jr. typically logs 75-hour weeks.

The director of the Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center at UC Irvine Medical Center has no complaints, though. “I don’t consider this work. It’s a calling,” said Meyskens, an expert in cancer prevention. “I am a very lucky man.”

In turn, UC Irvine is lucky to have him. Over the past two decades, the 62-year-old oncologist has helped transform the university into one of the nation’s premier institutions for cancer, especially in prevention and early diagnosis.

Through consensus-building, Meyskens founded UC Irvine’s cancer center, which, in 1997 became Orange County’s only National Cancer Institute (NCI)-designated comprehensive cancer center. Six years later, NCI chose UC Irvine as one of only six institutions nationwide to conduct clinical trials on promising cancer prevention drugs.

Under Meyskens, the Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center’s faculty has doubled to about 200 and grant dollars have increased significantly. A champion of interdisciplinary collaboration, he also has encouraged biologists, engineers and others to work together to improve research and patient care. Areas of particular focus include melanoma, women’s cancers and colon, prostate and pancreatic cancers.

In 2006, UC Irvine recognized Meyskens’ contributions by naming him the Daniel G. Aldrich Jr. Endowed Chair, which honors and supports the research of a faculty member of the highest distinction.

“Dr. Meyskens is an extraordinary researcher, teacher, and physician,” said David N. Bailey, M.D., vice chancellor for health affairs.

Early in life Meyskens suffered life-threatening seizures from a congenital disease, and spent much of his time in the hospital, where he developed a fascination with science and medicine. A graduate of the University of California, San Francisco Medical School, he spent 12 years at the University of Arizona before coming to UC Irvine in 1989.

As much as Meyskens enjoys combating cancer, sometimes he feels overwhelmed. To relieve stress, he began writing poetry a while back, with much of his work chronicling the relationship between physicians and cancer patients. In November, Fithian Press published “Aching for Tomorrow,” a collection of his poems.

“Writing is my creative and emotional outlet,” Meyskens said, “and a cheap psychiatrist.”

Ellen Olshansky Welcomed By Community

On Sept. 12, Ellen Olshansky, the founding director of UC Irvine’s Program in Nursing Science, hosted a luncheon at the Bren Events Center to introduce herself to the community. Olshansky, a former chair at the University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing, has ambitious plans for UC Irvine’s year-old program, which offers Orange County’s only four-year B.S. in nursing science. Within three years, Olshansky wants to introduce masters and doctoral programs to help alleviate the region’s acute nursing shortage.
Di Saia oversaw her chemotherapy — which included a drug he helped test in a clinical trial — and "He makes you feel special, like you're the only patient he's going to see all day," she said.

"I've always wanted to make a difference, and saving lives has certainly made me feel like I have," said Di Saia, who holds the endowed Dorothy Marsh Chair in Reproductive Biology.

One Patient’s Story

Vickie Thornell led a healthy life. The Apple Valley resident avoided fried foods, exercised three times a week and never smoked. Thornell, a mother of two and grandmother of six, seemed to have a bright future.

Still, she worried about cancer, the disease that had claimed her father young. When Thornell suddenly developed an intense cough that left her gasping for air and feeling as though she was about to give birth, she visited her allergist and gynecologist. Her allergist diagnosed her with pneumonia; her gynecologist discovered stage 4 cancer of her endometrium, or the mucus membrane lining the uterus, that had metastasized extensively to her lungs.

Thornell vowed to beat the disease. But how? Her gynecologist suggested that she go to UC Irvine Healthcare and see Dr. Philip J. Di Saia, a renowned gynecologic oncologist.

A few days later, Di Saia examined a frail, sickly Thornell. He immediately put her at ease.

"He makes you feel special, like you're the only patient he's going to see all day," she said.

Di Saia oversaw her chemotherapy — which included a drug he helped test in a clinical trial — and performed a hysterectomy. By October 2005, Thornell's cancer had gone into remission. When cancer reappeared this summer — a common occurrence among stage 4 cancer survivors — Di Saia removed her diseased cervix.

Today, Thornell, 55, is cancer-free and enjoying her family as never before.

"Dr. Di Saia saved my life," Thornell said. "Every time I see him, I give him a big hug."
Cutting-Edge Stuttering Center Opens

For those who struggle with the frustration, embarrassment and anxiety that often accompany stuttering, help is on the way.

On Oct. 4, Dr. Gerald Maguire, a pioneer in stuttering research and treatment, unveiled The Center for the Medical Treatment of Stuttering, the first major center in the world dedicated to treating the condition mostly with medicine. At the gathering, Maguire proposed a champagne toast to people who stutter.

“So those who stutter will no longer have to live in silence,” said Maguire, the Granville and Sidney Kirkup Chair in Psychiatry and Human Behavior for the Treatment of Stuttering, who has struggled with stuttering his entire life.

The stuttering center, which is located in the Neuropsychiatric Center at the UC Irvine Medical Center campus, will offer medical treatment, psychotherapy and speech therapy to about 400 patients annually.

Maguire, who has taken the novel approach of caring for stuttering patients with pharmacological treatments that modify dopamine levels, was among the first researchers to argue that stuttering has a neurological rather than a psychological or emotional basis.