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Surface family's \$10M gift to UNM seeks cancer cure

When he died in 2007 at the age of 94, **Victor Surface** had a goal: He wanted to help find a cure for cancer.

The retired soil conservation specialist for the U.S. Agency for International Development was all too familiar with cancer. His wife Ruby survived a bout with the disease in the early 1980s. But in 2002, she developed another cancer, and within six months was dead at the age of 88.

Surface and his wife were frugal in their more than six decades of marriage. For a year after being married in the late 1930s, they lived in a hogan on the Navajo Nation outside Gallup. In the end, that frugality had developed into a \$10 million trust fund, which Surface, his daughter Carolyn and the trust's attorney decided would go to the [University of New Mexico's](#) Cancer Center.

The Cancer Center announced the donation – the largest single gift in its history – in early April, and is now using it to build on its reputation of being one of the nation's premier cancer research centers.

The gift from the Surface family is being used to recruit up to eight cancer researchers, said Cancer Center and Director Cheryl Willman.

“The gift has to be used for the recruitment of new cancer researchers to the state of New Mexico. We are doing a lot of nanotechnology cancer research and that's why I think he left the gift to us,” Willman said. “We have already hired two new faculty with the gift and we have to recruit three or four more. Eighty percent of the gift will be endowed into research chairs and professorships at the Health Sciences Center.”

The Cancer Center is one of 66 research facilities in the U.S. that the National Cancer Institute has designated as a cancer center. The center has a staff of 500, 127 of whom are researchers. It has a \$61 million research budget this year and a \$75 million clinical budget, said Willman. The facility treats 65 percent of the adults in New Mexico who have cancer, and most children in the state who are diagnosed with the disease.

Although the gift was formally announced this year, it had been 10 years in the making, said Pat Vilella, the Albuquerque attorney who negotiated the deal between the Trust and UNM.

“He was always doing something and going somewhere,” Vilella said of Victor Surface. “He was a great photographer, and when he learned about new areas of cancer research, particularly in nanotechnology, he jumped right in.”

Victor, Carolyn and Vilella met throughout the years with Willman, who explained why she thought the Cancer Center would be the ideal recipient for the gift.

“I had many conversations with Victor and knew he wanted his money to go ‘where it would make a transformational difference in cancer research in New Mexico,’” Willman said. “As Victor and his family understood and believed, the research we do at the UNM Cancer Center translates into new and better diagnostic and treatment options for patients, and ultimately, moves us closer to finding cancer cures.”

Villella said one condition of Surface’s gift was that UNM not reduce other funding to the Cancer Center because of the donation.

Victor and Ruby Surface were married in 1938, after graduating from Utah State University. They lived in the hogan while doing a research stint on the Navajo Reservation, and then traveled the world while Victor worked as a soil conservation specialist for the federal government. The couple eventually settled in Albuquerque, Carolyn Surface, 70, said.

“Dad was especially interested in nanotechnology and stem cell research,” Carolyn Surface said. “We began the process [of donating the trust to UNM] before mother died in 2002. It was a lot of going back and forth with the contract regarding specific areas as to how the money would be used.”

Willman added that in the early stages of her talks with Victor, she didn’t know how big an estate he was leaving.

“When Mr. Surface had decided to leave his entire estate to the Cancer Center, I thought it might be \$2 million. But when I heard that it was actually \$12 million [the financial crisis eroded some of its value], tears came to my eyes,” Willman said. “We are thrilled and I think it’s amazing.”