HOPE, SWEAT AND TEARS:
A LOOK BACK AT HOW THE DRI WAS BUILT

Twenty-one years ago, approximately 900 supporters, including North America's Building Trades representatives, gathered for the dedication of the new Diabetes Research Institute facility at the University of Miami School of Medicine. It marked a major step in an unprecedented effort to cure this disease. As it stood then and continues to be, the DRI building is the most comprehensive cure-focused research facility of its kind in the world, combining the efforts of scientists and clinicians from a variety of scientific disciplines, all focused on one goal – curing diabetes.

In the early days, Barbara Singer labels buckets for a popular fundraiser called Hi-way Holdup, where supporters stood at intersections collecting donations.

FAMILIES UNITE

"We never could have imagined when we started fundraising in 1971 that the Diabetes Research Institute would become the world's leading diabetes research facility," stated **Barbara Singer**, who along with her husband, **Shelly Singer**, and four other families, created a fledgling foundation that grew into the Diabetes Research Institute Foundation. These five South Florida families were driven by a need to make an impact on research to find a cure for their children who were living with type 1 diabetes. "We raised $1,500 that first year; from our own pockets," she recalled with a smile.

The Kleiman family got involved a year later. **Gary Kleiman**, son of **Marge** and **Marty Kleiman**, was diagnosed with type 1 at age 6 and began experiencing complications while away at college. Gary remembers leaving Syracuse University to pursue treatment options while his parents connected with those initial foundation families and local physicians. These contacts and discussions led to a meeting with a doctor, who was well-regarded and attracted the attention of the small foundation.

A few years earlier, that very doctor, Dr. **Daniel Mintz**, was recruited to the University of Miami to head the endocrinology division and UM's clinical research unit. He was also conducting research with insulin-producing beta cells. "

Led by Dr. Daniel Mintz, the DRI was the first to cure diabetes in dogs. (Pictured with Fritz who was cured of diabetes in 1984.)

Sitting in our living room with my parents, close family friends, and Dr. and Mrs. Mintz, I was quickly struck by how this man was asking me about my thoughts, feelings and plans. I was amazed. He was the first doctor I'd ever met who seemed to so genuinely care about me as a person," Gary explained. "He also shared his belief that diabetes could be cured by transplanting insulin-producing cells, replacing the cells that were lost. He would later describe that his vision was to assemble the right people from different scientific backgrounds to work together in a focused effort to cure diabetes."

The Kleimans joined the Singers, the Kronowitts, and the other passionate families plus a growing number of supporters and fully committed themselves to supporting Mintz's mission. According to Gary, his parents "ate, drank, and at night, dreamed Foundation." Barbara added, "We were obsessed with this. Our board meetings would last until two o'clock in the morning!"

THE START OF SOMETHING BIG

Gary reluctantly agreed to share his story as a way of bringing attention to the need for research funding and to stress that insulin was not a cure. *"The Miami Herald* ran an article about me and about the program at UM. We were gaining a lot of traction and national attention," he said. "It was electric! There was a sense of urgency and so much energy, enthusiasm, and a deep shared belief that we could make it happen."

Soon after, the Love and Hope Ball became a signature event and was raising hundreds of thousands of dollars annually, plus ample press coverage in the society pages. People were starting to take notice; several key individuals were becoming involved; exciting things were happening. In a few short years, a Diabetes Research Center was formally established at the UM School of Medicine.

Operating on blind faith, determination and lots of coffee, they would pour every ounce of energy into their crusade. These families spearheaded the creation of the State of Florida Diabetes Program, pioneered approaches for women with diabetes to have successful pregnancies, and recruited key faculty to begin building a multi-disciplinary team. Progress was being made with cell transplantation, curing mice and dogs that developed diabetes. But it became clear, that in order to speed research to cure their children, the program needed to expand. Medical school space was limited so a plan was developed to seek support for a new building. The Foundation's by-laws did not provide for funding of bricks and mortar, so another source was needed.

GETTING THE FUNDING

Enter **Henry Keller, Jr.** His wife, **Adrienne**, had type 1 diabetes. He was a soft spoken, hard-driven businessman, whose family owned and operated a union-affiliated company, Keller Industries, which produced a wide range of home-building products.

Hank and Adrienne Keller with Marty Kleiman.

Barbara explained, "Hank was able to introduce Dr. Mintz and members of the DRI Foundation to the leadership of North America's Building Trades. We learned that several of the Unions' general presidents had personal interests in diabetes. Hank, Dr. Mintz, and the Kleimans had several initial meetings with Union presidents and presented our vision, goals, and needs to them."

Responding to a shared vision of a cure, the Building Trades in 1984 created Blueprint for Cure – the campaign to fund and build the DRI's state-of-the-art research and treatment facility. Across the country, skilled craftsmen and women dedicated their time and effort, raising funds through the D.A.D.s (Dollars Against Diabetes) Day program and Labor of Love Golf & Softball Slam event, to fund the construction of the facility. Several years later, they would break ground, and in 1994, celebrated their immense achievement at the dedication of the new Diabetes Research Institute.

"One of the greatest accomplishments in our mission to eradicate diabetes," wrote Dr. Mintz, asking everyone to take pride in the "building that represents hope to the millions of men, women and children who suffer from diabetes, and who can now look toward a future full of promise."

Barbara recounts the day as being filled with overwhelming emotion. **"I remember walking into the building with Marge Kleiman. We were wearing hard hats. We stood in the lobby, looked around – and we just cried. We could not believe that, with the help of so many generous people, our little organization was able to create this. To this day, I still can't believe it. I feel that way every time I step foot inside."**

Breaking ground at the DRI construction site.

A NEW BUILDING

Beyond the hope it represents, the 87,000-square-foot building, named in honor of Rowland and Sylvia Schaefer, is an impressive structure with a unique synergy between diabetes research and patient treatment. The guiding principle of its development and design was to mold a work of architecture from the rational nature of science and the compassionate nature of patient care. Nothing like it had previously existed anywhere in the world. On one side, the Kosow Diabetes Treatment Center offers the highest standards of health care delivery, with ongoing management and education support and numerous clinical research possibilities. On the other side stands the Leon J. Simkins Research Tower housing several floors of laboratories, replete with the latest biomedical technologies, all connected by a central corridor to promote the sharing of ideas. The DRI lobby, which also serves as the patient waiting area, both literally and symbolically connects the researchers with patients on a daily basis. Scientists entering or leaving the building are reminded of their purpose and those affected by diabetes know that these researchers are working to improve the quality of their lives.

The vision becomes reality; one place with a singular purpose to cure diabetes.

With this extraordinary gift by the Building Trades, Dr. Mintz believed the new facility provided a unique opportunity to attract the best and brightest new talent, and an international search began for a new scientific director to "supervise a multi-disciplinary research effort in a newly constructed research and clinical care facility," as was written in the advertisement placed in various medical journals.

THE BEST HOPE FOR A CURE

Twenty-one years ago, Dr. **Camillo Ricordi** took the helm of the Diabetes Research Institute. Today, he is acknowledged by his peers as one of the world's leading scientists in cure-focused diabetes research and cell transplantation. His contributions to the field include the invention of the Ricordi Chamber and Automated Method to process insulin-producing islet cells from a donor pancreas and many more innovations to restore natural insulin function.

Dr. Ricordi with his Ricordi Chamber.

The research mission of the DRI remains the same – to achieve a biological cure for diabetes by restoring natural insulin production and normalizing blood sugar levels without imposing other risks. As Dr. Ricordi has stated so eloquently, **"We will cure diabetes. This is not a prediction; it is a promise."**