Medical Center staff celebrate historic day

By Katy Watson and Ron Shaull | Wexner Medical Center at The Ohio State University

At 2 p.m. on Friday, Feb. 10, the sound of the Orton Hall chimes could be heard across the Oval and across the city of Columbus. They were the first sounds in a brief video that called to order an historic standing-room-only gathering in the College of Medicine’s new Clinical Skills Education and Assessment Center on the sixth floor of Prior Hall.

Hundreds of Medical Center staff heard the same chimes webcast live to Wallace Auditorium at University Hospital East, the lobby of 660 Ackerman Road, the Morehouse Medical Plaza Auditorium and an overflow room in Prior Hall. More than 8,000 other staff, alumni, donors and friends of the Medical Center heard them as well as they tuned in to the webcast in their own homes and offices.

All had gathered to see and hear the first public announcement of The Ohio State University Board of Trustees’ decision to rename The Ohio State University Medical Center the Wexner Medical Center at The Ohio State University. The Board’s decision was unanimous and is a tribute to more than 30 years of leadership and commitment that Board Chair Leslie H. Wexner and his wife Abigail have given to the university.

Word of the naming was first shared in a campuswide e-mail from President Gordon Gee as the trustees’ meeting ended around 12:45 p.m., and a similar memo from Medical Center Chief Executive Officer Dr. Steven Gabbe 15 minutes later that invited Medical Center faculty and staff to the 2 p.m. celebration event online and in multiple locations across the city.

Dr. Gabbe spoke first, followed by Trustee Alex Shumate and Dr. Gee. Mr. and Mrs. Wexner and their four children also were in attendance.

“It is an honor to join with everyone today on one of the most important days in the history of our university, and certainly our Medical Center,” said Dr. Gabbe.

Mr. Shumate added, “While [Mr. Wexner] has consistently given of his financial resources, starting with his first $5 contribution as a new Ohio State graduate, money alone would never have produced the unanimous vote. He is helping the Medical Center provide the next generation of medical professionals with the skills and the confidence to create innovations in medicine that will shape the future of society.”

“He shares with all of us a deep commitment to seeing the Medical Center realize its full potential as the most innovative healthcare institution in the world,” President Gee said.

Les Wexner has served for 16 years on Ohio State’s Board of Trustees, twice as its chair, and, along with his company’s foundation, has given more than $200 million to Ohio State.

He and his family and the Limited Brands Foundation made an historic $100 million donation to the university in February 2011, the largest gift in the university’s history, and requested that the majority of it go to support research and patient care in cancer.

A sustained standing ovation greeted Mr. Wexner as he was invited to the lectern to speak. He humbly thanked the audience and spoke of the greatness of the Medical Center for giving “birth to Ohio’s sons and daughters, like ours” before speaking to his children in a soft voice that all could hear.

“Your mom puts a lot of time in and takes the risks of leadership to do things to make the community a better place,” he said. “I try to do some of the same and I hope when you grow up, you’ll remember this day as a marker. I think the generosity of the community acknowledging our efforts is quite extraordinary. Mom and I are quite humbled and appreciative.

“I have often said that but for The Ohio State University, I would not have had an opportunity to receive a college degree,” Mr. Wexner added. “Attending this university changed my life, and I continue to witness the incredible potential this institution has to do the same thing for others.”

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The event closed with the College of Medicine’s student 

cappella singing group UltraSound performing “Carmen 

Ohio” and the unfurling of a six-story banner from the roof 
of University Hospital proclaiming the Wexner Medical 

Center at The Ohio State University.

“We really are experiencing a rebirth of the Medical 

Center as you look at the construction that’s been going on 

the last few years,” said Rich Davis, PhD, associate manager 
in the Medical Center Project Management Office, who 
attended the Prior Hall event. “What could be better than to 

have a new name to go with the new look? I couldn’t be 

more proud to have Wexner as the name.”

“It’s a great joy to work at Ohio State because of the pride 
you find here, not only in this city, but also in this univer-

sity,” said Jason Johnson, assistant sous chef in Nutrition 

Services. “This is a monumental experience with the new 

naming. It means new beginnings, new experiences, greater 

hope. I’m excited about it.”

Third-year medical student Zachary Rossfeld added, “I’m 

working on my second degree here at Ohio State. To have 

Les Wexner’s name as chairman of the board on my 

undergraduate degree and to continue here, it’s just been an 

amazing process. We have an amazing group of faculty, of 

staff, of students, of patients, and to see such outward 

recognition and to unify under one name I think just really 

sets the tone for the advancements that this university and 

this Medical Center, now united, will be making.”

Within minutes of the announcement, news stories 

began appearing both locally and nationally. The Columbus 

Dispatch was the first news outlet in Ohio to publish the 

story and, by the end of the weekend, news of the naming 

had appeared throughout the state and nation via the 

Associated Press, on CBS News and on the Modern 

Healthcare website. In its first three days, more than 11,000 

visitors accessed the new Wexner Medical Center at The 

Ohio State University website that was quickly built to 

celebrate and document the occasion.

Ohio State’s Wexner Medical Center is one of the largest 

academic medical centers in the country. It includes six 
hospitals, a College of Medicine, primary and specialty care 
offices throughout central Ohio, a centralized physician 

practice and more than a dozen research centers and 

institutes.
Medical Center renamed in Wexner’s honor

By Debra Jasper

Leslie H. Wexner doesn’t blink when he tells you that Ohio State researchers and scientists will find cures for cancer.

He realizes that sounds like a lofty goal, but the man who turned a small Columbus clothing store into a multibillion-dollar empire is known for thinking big.

“Why can’t it happen here?” he asks. “We’ve got a super medical center that’s advancing by leaps and bounds. And The James is doing great research and great work with patients. They’re a model for the entire university.”

Of course, Wexner has played a major role in enhancing Ohio State’s ability to produce breakthrough research and improve patient care. Last year, Wexner, his family and his company gave $100 million to the university — the largest gift in its history — with much of the money expected to go to the Medical Center, Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital and Solove Research Institute.

But while the gift generated widespread publicity, fewer people seem to know that beyond giving hundreds of millions of dollars to Ohio State, Wexner also donates thousands of hours of his time.

It is that commitment of both time and resources, said OSU President Gordon Gee, which spurred the Board of Trustees to vote unanimously Feb. 10 to rename Ohio State’s Medical Center the Wexner Medical Center at The Ohio State University.

“He has taught me a great deal about creating the future, inspiring others and always, always, always reaching beyond the known,” an emotional Gee said just before the vote. “That is what we celebrate with today’s honoree.”

Speaking at an afternoon event for the Medical Center’s board of directors, the two have been a driving force behind Pelotonia, an annual grassroots bike tour that has raised more than $25 million for cancer research. And they have been a part of countless university steering committees and fundraising campaigns.

For his part, Wexner said he doesn’t think of it as much as giving but as giving back. After all, he points out, “but for Ohio State, I wouldn’t have gone to college.”

“It never feels like work”

Beyond his extensive philanthropic work, Wexner continues to serve as chairman, president and CEO of Limited Brands, which include Victoria’s Secret, Pink, Bath & Body Works, La Senza and Henri Bendel. The company employs 90,000 people and its products are available at more than 3,000 stores around the world and online.

That’s a long way from his start as a small shopkeeper in Columbus.

Born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1937, Wexner learned about the world of retail from his parents, Harry, a Russian immigrant, and his mother, Belta, the first in her Russian family to be born in the US. He moved to Columbus with them in 1951 so they could open a store downtown named “Leslie’s.”

Besides an intense work ethic, what set him apart back then was his idea for launching a new kind of business — and a deep passion for making it happen. “I put myself into it with full-hearted optimism. No caution.”

So, four years after graduating from Ohio State, Wexner borrowed $5,000 from his aunt to open a women’s apparel store in Upper Arlington called The Limited. Unlike his dad’s general clothing store, he limited his offerings to popular women’s sportswear — a plan his father originally dismissed, telling him: “You’ll never be a merchant.”

The store reached $160,000 in sales in the first year. Wexner had found his calling, saying to an interviewer in 1986: “If you want to make it a success, you’ve got to treat people like you want to be treated.”

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Today, at 74, Wexner still feels the same way. He radiates energy when talking about his company, describing it as a “young business” that is always exciting. “It never feels like work. The community stuff never feels like work. Raising a family never feels like work,” he said, adding with a laugh, “Gold felt like work. So I quit.”

Wexner said his wife, Abigail, told him a few years ago that he might want to consider retiring. But she quickly changed her mind, saying he just had too many big ideas.

“I have to have something that gets me going,” he explained. “Like saying, ‘We’re going to double the business in the next five years.’ Or like Ohio State saying, ‘We’re going to rank in the top 10 in the next five years.’”

This year, Wexner continued his business expansion with new retail stores in Moscow — in a sense coming full circle. His father, he explained, left Russia on foot with people chasing him.

“When I visited the store, I walked back out, put my arm on the railing, got a few tears and thought, ‘Oh dad, isn’t this something.’”

A giving spirit

Wexner has little patience with donors who wait until they die to bequeath large philanthropic gifts. Doing great things only after you’ve gone to heaven, he said, is “cheating yourself.” Better to assess the need in the here and now.

He’s believed that ever since he gave Ohio State his first donation — for $5 — three years after graduating.

“When I started to do community work, my dad said, ‘Don’t be disappointed because you can’t change the world,’” he recalled. “And I thought about that for a while. And thought, he may be right, but I choose to believe that I can. Even if I can move it a fraction of a centimeter, it is worth the try.”

Besides, Wexner said, good leaders are visible leaders. And big donations can spur the additional gifts — big and small — needed to build the best facilities, recruit the best faculty and attract the best students.

Board of Trustees Member Gilbert Cloyd told the other board members on Feb. 10 that Les and Abigail Wexner have consistently provided extraordinary leadership to the university. “So it is appropriate to name the center for Les and his family — for all the passion, energy and leadership they bring to enhance the quality of people’s lives,” he said.

To describe the renaming, Cloyd said he borrowed a phrase that Wexner often uses: “This is really a big deal.”

Wexner said that both of his parents would be proud to know he’s making a difference in the medical arena — and to see the new name, Wexner Medical Center, go up on signs across the hospital grounds.

Then he laughed and added, “My mother would say, ‘You deserve it.’ My father would say, ‘It’s nice that they acknowledged what you’ve done. But what now? What are you going to do next?’”