

The New York Times

\$1 Billion Donation Will Provide Free Tuition at a Bronx Medical School

Feb. 26, 2024, 9:00 a.m. ET

Dr. Ruth Gottesman, a longtime professor at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, is making free tuition available to all students going forward.



Dr. Ruth Gottesman's donation is notable not only for its staggering size, but also because it is going to a medical institution in the Bronx, the city's poorest borough. Credit...David Dee Delgado for The New York Times

The 93-year-old widow of a Wall Street financier has donated \$1 billion to a Bronx medical school, the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, with instructions that the gift be used to cover tuition for all students going forward.

The donor, Dr. Ruth Gottesman, is a former professor at Einstein, where she studied learning disabilities, developed a screening test and ran literacy programs. It is one of [the largest charitable donations](#) to an educational institution in the United States and most likely the largest to a medical school.

[The fortune came from her late husband](#), David Gottesman, known as Sandy, who was a protégé of Warren Buffett and had made an early investment in Berkshire Hathaway, the conglomerate Mr. Buffett built.

The donation is notable not only for its staggering size, but also because it is going to a medical institution in the Bronx, the city's poorest borough. The Bronx has a high rate of premature deaths and [ranks as the unhealthiest county](#) in New York. Over the past generation, a number of billionaires have given hundreds of millions of dollars to better-known medical schools and hospitals in Manhattan, the city's wealthiest borough.

While her husband ran an investment firm, First Manhattan, Dr. Gottesman had a long career at Einstein, a well-regarded medical school, starting in 1968, when she took a job as director of psychoeducational services. She has long been on Einstein's board of trustees and is currently the chair.

In recent years, she has become close friends with Dr. Philip Ozuah, the pediatrician who oversees the medical college and its affiliated hospital, Montefiore Medical Center, as the chief executive officer of the health system. That friendship and trust loomed large as she contemplated what to do with the money her husband had left her.

In an interview on Friday at the Einstein campus in the Morris Park neighborhood, Dr. Ozuah and Dr. Gottesman spoke about the donation, how it came together and what it would mean for Einstein medical students.

The Friendship



Dr. Gottesman became close friends with Dr. Philip Ozuah, who oversees the medical college and its affiliated hospital, Montefiore Medical Center. Credit...David Dee Delgado for The New York Times

In early 2020, the two sat next to each other on a 6 a.m. flight to West Palm Beach, Fla. It was the first time they had spent hours together.

They spoke about their childhoods — hers in Baltimore, his, some 30 years later, in Nigeria — and what they had in common. Both had doctorates in education and had spent their careers at the same institution in the Bronx, helping children and families in need.

Dr. Ozuah described moving to New York, not knowing a single person in the state, and spending years as a community doctor in the South Bronx before ascending to the top of the medical school.

Leaving the airport, Dr. Ozuah offered his arm to Dr. Gottesman, then not quite 90, as they approached the curb. She waved him off and told him to “watch your own step,” he recalled with a chuckle.

Within a few weeks, the coronavirus brought the world to a grinding halt. Dr. Gottesman’s husband, in his 90s, became ill with the new pathogen, and she had a mild case. Dr. Ozuah sent an ambulance to the Gottesman home in Rye, N.Y., to bring them to Montefiore, the Bronx’s largest hospital.

In the weeks that followed, Dr. Ozuah began making daily house calls — in full protective gear — to check in on the couple as Mr. Gottesman recovered. “That’s how the friendship evolved,” he said. “I spent probably every day for about three weeks, visiting them in Rye.”

About three years ago, Dr. Ozuah asked Dr. Gottesman to head the medical school’s board of trustees. She had done the job before, but given her age, she was surprised. The gesture reminded her of the fable about [the lion and the mouse](#), she told Dr. Ozuah at the time, explaining that when the lion spares the mouse’s life, the mouse tells him, “Maybe someday I’ll be helpful to you.”

In the story, the lion laughs haughtily. “But Phil didn’t go ‘ha, ha, ha,’” she noted with a smile.



Dr. Gottesman's husband died in 2022 at age 96. "He left me, unbeknownst to me, a whole portfolio of Berkshire Hathaway stock," she recalled. The instructions were simple: "Do whatever you think is right with it," she recalled.

It was overwhelming to think about, so at first she didn't. But her children encouraged her not to wait too long.

When she focused on the bequest, she realized immediately what she wanted to do, she recalled. "I wanted to fund students at Einstein so that they would receive free tuition," she said. There was enough money to do that in perpetuity, she said.

Over the years, she had interviewed dozens of prospective Einstein medical students. Tuition is more than \$59,000 a year, and many graduated with crushing medical school debt, often more than \$200,000.

Not only would future students be able to embark on their careers without the debt burden, but she hoped that her donation would also enable a wider pool of aspiring doctors to apply to medical school. "We have terrific medical students, but this will open it up for many other students whose economic status is such that they wouldn't even think about going to medical school," she said.

"That's what makes me very happy about this gift," she added. "I have the opportunity not just to help Phil, but to help Montefiore and Einstein in a transformative way — and I'm just so proud and so humbled — both — that I could do it."

Dr. Gottesman went to see Dr. Ozuah in December to tell him that she would be making a major gift. She reminded him of the lion and mouse story. This, she explained, was the mouse's moment.

“If someone said, ‘I’ll give you a transformative gift for the medical school,’ what would you do?” she asked.

There were probably three things, Dr. Ozuah said.

“One,” he began, “you could have education be free —”

“That’s what I want to do,” she said. He never mentioned the other ideas.

Dr. Gottesman sometimes wonders what her late husband would have thought of her decision.

“I hope he’s smiling and not frowning,” she said with a chuckle. “But he gave me the opportunity to do this, and I think he would be happy — I hope so.”

Einstein will not be the first medical school to eliminate tuition.

In 2018, New York University announced it would begin [offering free tuition](#) to medical students and [saw a surge in applications](#).

The Name

Dr. Gottesman was reluctant to attach her name to her donation. “Nobody needs to know,” Dr. Ozuah recalled her saying at first. But Dr. Ozuah insisted that others might find her life inspiring. “Here’s somebody who is totally dedicated to the welfare of others and wants no accolades, no recognition,” Dr. Ozuah said.

Dr. Ozuah noted that the going price for getting your name on a medical school or hospital was perhaps a fifth of Dr. Gottesman’s donation. Cornell Medical College and New York Hospital now include the surname of Sanford Weill, the former head of Citigroup. New York University’s medical center was renamed for Ken Langone, a co-founder of Home Depot. Both men donated hundreds of millions of dollars.

But it is a condition of Dr. Gottesman’s gift that the Einstein College of Medicine not change its name. Albert Einstein, the physicist who [developed the theory of relativity](#), [agreed to confer his name](#) on the medical school, which opened in 1955.

The name, she noted, could not be beat. “We’ve got the gosh darn name — we’ve got Albert Einstein.”

[Joseph Goldstein](#) covers health care in New York for The Times, following years of criminal justice and police reporting. [More about Joseph Goldstein](#)