

Millionaires' pet projects

When philanthropy gets personal.

[Katharine Sanderson](#)

There are no rules governing how philanthropic money is spent. This has allowed a number of wealthy individuals to throw cash at pet projects — such as when Andrew Carnegie sponsored the expedition that discovered a species of dinosaur, earning him a namesake (*Diplodocus carnegiei*).

Some pet projects might be regarded as a bit crazy — or at least against the norm. Others have focused on a specific area of research for more personal reasons.

Take diabetes, for example. US engineer Lee Iacocca is famed for inventing the Ford Mustang. He then set up the Olivio company, which makes margarine and other cooking products from olive oil. In the early 1980s Iacocca's wife died from type-1 diabetes, and since then Iacocca has ploughed his profits from Olivio into diabetes research, in particular Denise Faustman's group at Harvard Medical School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was Iacocca's philanthropy that drove Faustman to a breakthrough discovery, she says.

Iacocca is not a scientist. He is a relatively rich man who simply wanted to know when a cure for diabetes would be found. In 1998 he asked Faustman to take her results identifying the T-cell defect in mice that is responsible for diabetes, straight to an experiment that would aim to find a cure. Faustman was concerned that this experiment would not be respected by the scientific community: "I explained that this was too big a jump and I couldn't take that risk," she says. But Iacocca insisted and put up the cash.

And it paid off. Faustman's research led to a treatment that permanently restored normal blood-glucose levels in mice¹. "He forced me to do a high-risk, high-benefit experiment," says Faustman.

Outside the box

At the less mainstream end of the spectrum is the recently closed Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research (PEAR) lab, at Princeton University, New Jersey. PEAR was set up in 1979 thanks to a donation from a rich aviator - James McDonnell - who funded Robert Jahn, a tenured engineering



The inventor of the Ford Mustang has ploughed money into diabetes research.

professor at Princeton, and his quest to investigate telekinesis (the ability to move objects using the power of the mind).

“ If science were only funded by its own inner sanctum it would never move forward. ”

Brenda Dunne, who was PEAR's laboratory manager, and who now works at the International Consciousness Research Laboratories says that without philanthropy, fringe research activities such as theirs would not survive. "Philanthropists are our life blood," she says, "these people are wonderful." Dunne would not reveal the identities of these wonderful people.

Brenda Dunne, ex-laboratory manager.

PEAR required \$250,000 a year, at most, to survive, says Dunne, and that money came from a number of interested individuals who often claimed to have experienced paranormal phenomena themselves. Dunne goes as far as to suggest that science depends on projects, such as PEAR, with philanthropic funders. "If science were only funded by its own inner

sanctum it would never move forward," she says.

Cold cash

A rich, anonymous, businessman (who made his money from bakeries) in the United States is currently funding research into another much-derided scientific effort - the quest to get energy out of low-temperature nuclear reactions (otherwise known as cold fusion). The field is undergoing a small resurgence lately, with the recent addition of a low-energy nuclear-reaction session at the American Chemical Society's national meeting and a forthcoming talk by a cold-fusion researcher at a US Department of Defence conference.

Steve Krivit, editor of the New Energy Times, says that without philanthropic money, cold fusion wouldn't have survived. The topic has so much stigma attached, he says, that it "isn't a subject that anyone wants to touch," referring to the more traditional funding bodies.

The field's anonymous baker and backer doesn't consider himself a philanthropist, although he admits he has given millions of dollars to cold-fusion researchers, and funded a number of graduate students in the area. Much of the research done in the field since it went wildly out of fashion - following the scandal surrounding Pons and Fleischmann's irreproducible claims in 1989 - has been funded by the researchers themselves. "They are the real philanthropists," the un-named donor says.

For more traditional research, such as Faustman's diabetes efforts, philanthropy brings the wider picture of the research goal into sharper focus, she says. "It reminds you what you are meant to be doing."

References

1. Ryu S., *et al.* J. Clin. Invest., 108 . 63 - 72 (2001). | [Article](#) | [PubMed](#) | [ISI](#) | [ChemPort](#) |

Story from news@nature.com:

<http://news.nature.com/news/2007/070514/070514-11.html> © 2006 Nature Publishing Group