

# The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center



ENDOWMENT PROFILE

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## The Pioneering Spirit of the Virginia Harris Cockrell Endowment

AS A YOUNG GIRL growing up in Smithville, Virginia Harris Cockrell formed a deep appreciation for the natural beauty of the wooded, rolling hills surrounding her hometown, about an hour's drive from Austin. Today, nearly 300 people find it an ideal setting for scientific research, education, conferences and workshops — thanks, in part, to a philanthropic gift made by The Cockrell Foundation in 1998, 15 years after her death.

The *Virginia Harris Cockrell Endowment* was created to fund innovative research and educational activities at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center Science Park, the brainchild of MD Anderson's first president, R. Lee Clark, M.D., during the early 1960s. Named in recognition of the foundation's generous gift, the Virginia Harris Cockrell Cancer Research



Dr. Sharon Y.R. Dent (left) and the Virginia Harris Cockrell Cancer Research Center

Center, Science Park, occupies 717 acres of land in Buescher State Park near Smithville and remains a unique component of MD Anderson. The facility is a fitting tribute to its namesake, who was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma in 1963 and received treatment at MD Anderson. Virginia Harris Cockrell joined the MD Anderson Cancer Center Board of Visitors (BOV), MD Anderson's advisory board, in 1972 and became an active and valued member.

Dula Cockrell, Ernest D. Cockrell Jr. and his wife, Virginia, created The Cockrell Foundation, based in Houston, in 1957. The foundation was incorporated in 1966. Virginia and Ernest's son, Ernest H. Cockrell, of Houston and a past BOV chair, says his parents' desire to give drives the family foundation, even today.

"Our family has many strong ties to MD Anderson," says Cockrell. "Both my mother and my wife were successfully treated here, so I understand the critical need to fund research. My parents instilled in my sister, Carol, and me the importance of giving back, and we're thrilled to help make MD Anderson's mission of eradicating cancer a reality."

Sharon Y.R. Dent, Ph.D., chair of the Department of Molecular Carcinogenesis and director of the Science Park, is grateful for the endowment, which provides the means to identify and support research areas of greatest need at the Virginia Harris Cockrell Cancer Research Center.

"Both the Harris and Cockrell families were Smithville-area pioneers," says Dent. "With the generous support that the Science Park campus receives from the *Virginia Harris Cockrell Endowment*, we can pioneer cancer research through innovative pilot projects, educational activities and cutting-edge technology."

This past year funds from the *Virginia Harris Cockrell Endowment* supported four faculty members whose research focuses on understanding the cellular and molecular mechanisms that cause cancer in hopes of finding new and better treatments for lymphoma, melanoma and prostate cancer.

It also continues to provide funds used for numerous educational programs, spawning a new generation of young people prepared to make a difference in oncology. In addition, the endowment has enabled Science Park to purchase much-needed equipment such as a water distilling system and reservoir and a genotyping system integral to innovative research projects.

Today, Virginia Harris Cockrell's legacy is still touching lives, and her family's philosophy of giving continues to inspire excellence and ingenuity. Science Park has grown to be recognized internationally as a world leader in research on the origins of cancer and cancer prevention.

"All of these funds play a critical role in shaping Science Park in perpetuity," says Dent. "Our gratitude to the Cockrell family for their vision and generosity will endure just as long."

If you'd like more information about how to start an endowment, please contact:

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