In 1948, along with the thousands of babies born in Cedars of Lebanon Hospital’s maternity ward, something equally life-affirming came into being: the beginning of a long tradition of philanthropy for Maxine Dunitz. World War II had just ended and—inspired by the work of her aunt, Reba Dubin, who was one of the founders of the Helping Hand of Los Angeles—Maxine became involved. “From my late teens, I was a member of the Helping Hand,” Maxine recalls. “So many needy women, particularly from the Boyle Heights area, needed prenatal care and supplies. We used to get together monthly to sew layettes for them. All of their hospital costs were covered, and they each went home with a hand-sewn layette and other supplies.”

Now, she is helping children once again with the Maxine Dunitz Children’s Health Center—her most generous gift to Cedars-Sinai. When asked about the idea that sparked her transformative gift, she explains, “This issue had been gnawing at me: If you have a sick child, you should know that Cedars-Sinai has top pediatricians and a superb infrastructure. The community needs to understand that it has neonatal and pediatric research and care as excellent as the other major children’s hospitals.”

She approached Cedars-Sinai president and CEO Tom Priselac with an original concept in philanthropy spurred by an idea close to her heart: Grownups aren’t the only ones who deserve the world’s best care. Her vision was bold and clear: to create a permanent “endowment for learning” that would support the umbrella of Cedars-Sinai medical services available to infants, children, and their parents: neonatal and pediatric intensive care units, a variety of clinics ranging from pediatric surgery to orthopedics, as well as child life services, among others.

The Children’s Health Center offers some of the world’s most advanced treatments for babies and...
children, and the endowment behind it creates a strong infrastructure to recruit and retain highly skilled faculty and offer specialized training. While the Center is not a physical building, central to its mission is a focus on advocating Cedars-Sinai’s clinical expertise and spreading new information pertaining to children’s illnesses, research, and treatments.

“My hope is that more and more babies and children will benefit from our world-class medical center, now and in perpetuity,” Maxine says, referring to the endowment’s ability to generate long-term revenue. Coming in the final months of the Discovering for Life campaign, her transformative gift helped Cedars-Sinai meet—and even exceed—its $350 million campaign goal, bringing final success to an ambitious effort to grow the Medical Center’s research endowment.

Shortly after Maxine’s husband, Gerald Dunitz, joined the Cedars-Sinai Board of Governors, she was nominated in recognition of her extensive volunteer work. Ultimately rising to chair the group, she was instrumental in raising millions of dollars for the Medical Center, advocating the hospital’s work in a program that later became the Healthcare College. She is now a Life Trustee of Cedars-Sinai.

When Gerald Dunitz was diagnosed with a rare form of heart disease, the couple naturally turned to their hospital for care. “Jerry was given just 12 hours to live, but he lived for 15 more years. I always say that Cedars of Lebanon saved my father’s life and Cedars-Sinai saved my husband’s life,” she shares. Together, the couple established the Gerald and Maxine Dunitz Fellowship for the Division of Cardiology under the direction of P.K. Shah, MD. Maxine has since established four more fellowships in Jerry’s memory. “Were it not for the fact that my husband was a successful businessman, these fellowships and endowments would not exist,” she says. “I will always be grateful for that.”

In 1997, she created the Maxine Dunitz Neurosurgical Institute to support the work of Keith Black, MD, and his colleagues. Neurosurgeons and researchers at the Institute are pioneering new therapies for brain diseases, and even developing a vaccine to be used against the most malignant brain tumors.

Maxine cherishes the immense personal gratification that comes from seeing the fruits of the Institute’s work. From all across the country, she’s received notes and calls from grateful patients and their families—men, women, and children whose lives have been transformed by the Institute’s world-class faculty and staff. “I see how patients are treated with such dignity and care, and I cannot tell you the pride I feel,” she says.

But Maxine’s focus goes beyond Cedars-Sinai. Her involvement is evident among children’s programs and organizations across Los Angeles County. She’s particularly proud of the annual Blue Ribbon Children’s Festival at the Music Center. The 40-year-old art education program allows fifth-graders from the greater Los Angeles area to experience their first live program in music, dance, or theater. Maxine conceived and endowed A Journey Through the Music Center, a unique book given to every child at the Festival. “Many of the children have never owned a book, and most have never seen a live performance. Throughout the years, many people have told me how this experience touched their lives when they were young.” To date, 125,000 books have been given away.

Maxine describes her philanthropic journey as “going full-circle,” adding that caring for the “full cycle of life” is central to the Children’s Health Center’s mission. “That is what makes Cedars-Sinai an extraordinary hospital for this community.”

While the number of children benefiting from her generosity is growing every day and will continue to grow throughout the years, it is still a simple equation, she says. “Cedars-Sinai has given me life over and over again. It’s a privilege to give something back.”