

## The Philanthropic Spark

Gene Montesano and Barry Perlman

# A Lucky Pair

BY VANESSA McGRADY

**T**hirty years ago, Gene Montesano and Barry Perlman had little more to their names than an old Volvo and a van. They lived a laid-back, carefree existence in Miami Beach. “You didn’t have to worry about anything but a coconut falling on your head or a scorpion in your shoe,” says Montesano.

Fast forward to 2008: The two own a fashion empire in Lucky Brand Jeans, and last year, the Lucky Brand Foundation bestowed a \$500,000 endowment

to Marla Dubinsky, MD, director of the Pediatric Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) Program at Cedars-Sinai—one of the nation’s finest. The grant will be paid over five years and matched dollar-for-dollar by other donors. The goal is to eventually grow the endowment to \$5 million.

“I’ve been here seven years and this gift is an important step for our program,” Dr. Dubinsky says. “It’s helped us reach out to grateful patients and community partners.”



PHOTO BY JULIANE BACKMANN

Montesano and Perlman met working in a clothing store, and, moved by a mix of entrepreneurial and hippie/rock 'n' roll spirit, opened their own denim store and experimented with new special washes.

They grew their business, and helped others along the way. Perlman recalls organizing bed races down the streets of Miami for 10 years. They raised more than \$100,000 for muscular dystrophy. But Montesano, always quick with a punchy quip, realized he needed to wander and see the world, but could only think of two ways to get out of Miami: "You had to be a wise guy or date a rich girl or a stewardess," he jokes.

He moved to California, and soon realized that possibilities were endless. "You could do anything here," Montesano says. "You could just put on a big fat tie and hat and you could be famous. You could spark something."

And spark they did. Temporarily going their separate ways, Gene became involved with Bongo, a successful multimillion denim brand. Eventually Barry joined him in California and by 1989 they'd launched Lucky Brand Jeans on their own. Today, the ubiquitous denims adorn derrieres worldwide.

Montesano's mane of long, straight, chestnut-hued hair has become a soft gray ponytail, tied neatly in back. Perlman's *Frampton Comes Alive* look from the '70s is more soccer dad these days. Still, the cool lives on.

At their headquarters in Vernon, an industrial neighborhood east of downtown Los Angeles, they share an office with a soaring ceiling. Walls are filled with vintage guitars and rock memorabilia: a Bob Dylan concert poster, John Lennon's art. The space next to Montesano's desk is devoted to pictures of his family. The atmosphere is casual and hip as their young staff—all wearing jeans, of course—shuffle up and down the halls. It's business their style, the Lucky Brand way: infused with music, philanthropy, art, and love. Their company serves as a groovy, yet highly effective bridge between two worlds they love: music and philanthropy. Lucky Brand Foundation, launched in 1996, has raised over \$8 million through events that have featured legendary rock performers such as Jackson Browne, Joe Cocker, B.B. King, and Bonnie Raitt, among many others. Last year the Lucky Brand Foundation celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Summer of Love and the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's* album with an event that raised more than \$700,000.

The foundation was established with a mandate to help children—sooner, rather than later.

"Our whole thing is making a difference *now*," Montesano says. Projects include universally accessible playgrounds that are as fun for kids in wheelchairs and with physical limitations as they are for everyone else; programs for kids and families with cancer; and pediatric medical mobile units.

As for the endowment for Dr. Marla Dubinsky's research, Perlman says that \$500,000 will be a token amount if that's the only thing in the way of curing IBD. He has every faith that she will succeed.

There were a lot of ways she could go with her medical career, and Dr. Dubinsky didn't want to take the easy route. She asked herself which disease she should pursue "to really change someone's life," and realized that there was very little known about pediatric IBD, which often strikes without warning.

IBD symptoms include inflammation and ulceration of the intestines; the most common manifestations are Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. It is a hugely painful and socially awkward disease that is further compounded by emotional and psychological factors for children and teens.

"One day they're going on a happy path and then they're suddenly derailed," Dubinsky says. "It's a joy to say, 'You will never be as sick as you are today,' and come through on that promise."

The goal of Dubinsky's research is to learn enough about the disease in order to be able to prevent it or detect it early enough to maximize the quality of life. Dubinsky met Montesano and Perlman five years ago through mutual friends, and it became clear that they all held a common passion for making a difference. Soon after, the Lucky Brand Foundation held a fund-raiser that involved composer Randy Newman playing piano in Perlman's living room.

Part of what compels Perlman and Montesano to reach out to causes such as Pediatric IBD comes from gratitude for having good lives, and realizing that not everyone else does. "We've got three kids each. They're beautiful, healthy children," Perlman says. "We have lots of love and success."

Very lucky, indeed. ■

*The 2008 Lucky Brand Foundation Black Tie & Blue Jean Gala is scheduled for Nov. 14 at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Beverly Hills. For more information, call The New Philanthropy Group at (310) 899-9191.*