Joyce J. Cammilleri believes in fitness for the body and the brain. The owner of World Gym International has given $2 million to support the Brain and Creativity Institute housed in USC College.

“I haven’t forgotten how many people believed in me and in my vision and invested their time, talent and money into my dreams,” Cammilleri said. “I feel an obligation to make that same contribution to others, and with research, dreams are unlimited.”

Cammilleri’s gift will support brain research and the construction of a new facility on the University Park campus for the institute led by Antonio Damasio and his wife, Hanna. In recognition of her philanthropy, an auditorium in the new Brain and Creativity Institute facility will be named the Joyce J. Cammilleri Auditorium.

Founded in 2006, the institute researches the underpinnings of the brain’s functions—from emotion and decision-making to innovation and creativity. Researchers use the newest technology in brain imaging and their fresh insights to probe how the human brain functions at the level of systems, cells and molecules.

Understanding the neurological basis of mental phenomena is indispensable for both medical and social progress, according to the Damios, who were elated with the donation.

“Mrs. Cammilleri’s gift will have a major impact on the activities of the Brain and Creativity Institute,” said Antonio Damasio, the David Dornsife Professor of Neuroscience and professor of psychology and neurology. “First, the new auditorium will become a place where science, music and the visual arts can come together for everyone to enjoy and learn.

“Second, the gift will have great impact on our research activities and allow us to carry out projects that otherwise could not get off the ground.”

USC College Dean Howard Gillman echoed the sentiment.

“Mrs. Cammilleri’s extraordinary gift not only helps ensure that world-class brain research will continue at the institute,” Gillman said, “but also that the new facility will include an outstanding teaching and performance space that embodies the spirit of the work conducted there in the fields of creativity and the mind.”

The youngest of seven children from a farming community in rural South Dakota, Cammilleri was a schoolteacher for two decades, beginning her career in a one-room schoolhouse. She eventually made her way to teaching elementary school in Southern California.

With the arrival of her three children — including twins — she became a full-time mother. Once her children were in school, she and her husband created JOICO Laboratories, a hair care product company.

When the company was sold in 2001, Cammilleri realized she was in the position to begin supporting important causes.

For the past two years, Cammilleri also has donated to the Keck School of Medicine of USC and USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center.

“I believe USC has the unique capability of bringing the results of their research to patients faster than any other institution,”
she said.

She praised USC for its camaraderie among doctors, scientists and staff.

“All successful ventures rely upon open communication and teamwork,” she said. “I love the way that USC is structured; there are so many ongoing projects that cross over into other areas of research. There is a great sense of collaboration and teamwork.”

Upon meeting the Damasios and their distinguished team, Cammilleri knew the best was yet to come from the institute.

“I’m excited to help further research that will impact countless lives and hopefully reduce human suffering on a macro level.”

Cammilleri looks at giving to USC as a way to invest in her community and in local talent.

“Consider the unique environment USC provides — ongoing research, the best of medical care and a long history of service to the community,” she said. “Just knowing we have a place like this, which is so accessible to so many, offers a sense of security and hope.”

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