Tulane receives $4 million gift to create School of Medicine chair, accelerator fund to fight deadly lung diseases

March 30, 2026 9:00 AM Patrick Davis
today@tulane.edu

Inspired by the care Dr. Victor J. Thannickal showed Allen Johnson Jr. as he suffered from pulmonary disease, the Johnson family gifted $4 million to the Tulane School of Medicine.

Tulane University has received a $4 million gift to strengthen the School of Medicine’s fight against pulmonary fibrosis and other deadly lung diseases, bolstering its growing reputation as a hub for research and patient care. This visionary commitment establishes the Allen A. Johnson Jr. Distinguished Chair in Medicine Endowed Fund and creates the Allen A. Johnson Jr. Research Acceleration

Fund to strengthen translational discovery in the John W. Deming Department of Medicine.

The gifts honor the memory of Allen A. Johnson Jr., a Birmingham, Ala., native who served for 41 years on the board of the Coca-Cola Bottling Co. United, now the second-largest privately held bottler of Coke products in North America. He was the grandson of Crawford Johnson Sr., who founded its predecessor, Birmingham Coca-Cola. Allen Johnson Jr. died in 2021 from pulmonary disease and was under the care of Dr. Victor J. Thannickal, chair of the John W. Deming Department of Medicine at Tulane.

Thannickal's expertise, compassion and commitment to Johnson's care left a deep impression on Johnson's family, and their gratitude to Thannickal lies at the heart of this gift.

The donors are Johnson's nephew, Conrad Rafield, and his wife, Peggy; Johnson's niece, Margot Shaw, and her husband, Gates; and others who prefer to remain anonymous.

"Allen believed deeply in lifting others up," said Conrad Rafield, his nephew. "The care he received from Dr. Thannickal meant a great deal to our family, and honoring that dedication is an important part of this gift. If our family can help an innovator take a courageous next step — or help a patient breathe more easily and live more fully — then we are honoring Allen in exactly the way he would have wanted."

For Tulane School of Medicine, these investments build directly on long-standing institutional strengths. "Tulane has long been a leader in pulmonary research and care, and now we have a tremendous opportunity to take that leadership to the next level," said L. Lee Hamm, senior vice president and dean of the School of Medicine.

"Philanthropy like this not only propels the development of lifesaving therapies but also strengthens our academic mission, elevates our national standing and — most importantly — delivers hope to patients who urgently need it," he said. "Tulane is profoundly thankful to the Rafield and Shaw families and all who helped make this possible."

Discoveries led by Tulane's Section of Pulmonary Diseases, Critical Care, and Environmental Medicine and Thannickal's research laboratory have advanced the basic understanding of pulmonary fibrosis and its links to the biology of aging that

will enable new therapeutic approaches, such as the repurposing of current FDA-approved drugs.

"We are grateful to Allen’s family for making this extraordinary gift that represents an enduring testament to his desire to find better treatments for this deadly lung disease,” Thannickal said. “The Allen A. Johnson Jr. Distinguished Chair and the Research Acceleration Fund will support bold new ideas to more effectively and safely treat pulmonary fibrosis while building on existing strengths that Tulane offers in discoveries related to organ fibrosis and age-related diseases in general.”

The endowed chair is designed to ensure Tulane can continue to attract and support world-class physician scientists whose work stands at the forefront of pulmonary medicine. The donors have asked that special consideration be given to scholars with a dedicated focus on pulmonary fibrosis and chronic lung diseases when naming the inaugural chair holder.

Complementing the chair is the research acceleration fund, a flexible resource that allows scientists to pursue breakthrough ideas swiftly and strategically. Such discretionary funds often serve as catalysts, enabling researchers to compete for large-scale federal and foundation grants that expand the scope and impact of their work.

Pulmonary fibrosis remains one of the most devastating chronic lung diseases worldwide, affecting more than 150,000 people in the United States alone, with about 50,000 new diagnoses each year. The average survival rate of three to five years, worse than many cancers, underscores the urgency of advancing new therapies and improving diagnostic pathways.

Tulane’s investigators and clinicians have become national leaders in this area, according to Hamm, building a foundation of expertise that spans laboratory breakthroughs, clinical excellence and patient-centered care. Tulane is the only academic medical center in Louisiana recognized for quality care by the Pulmonary Fibrosis Foundation. Patients travel from across the United States and around the world seeking Tulane’s expertise.

This growing profile is matched by exceptional momentum in the laboratory. In recent years, Tulane researchers have secured nearly $30 million in competitive funding to unlock the mechanisms that drive lung fibrosis and to test compounds that may repair or even reverse scarring.