Getting through

On special occasions such as his birthday and important holidays like Christmas or Easter, Linda Murphy sets balloons free so her late son Anthony (lovingly referred to as “my Tony”) can live forever. This simple, symbolic act allows Murphy to reconnect with her son in a spiritual way and also leaves her feeling closer to him.

“I write him a letter with all I have inside me and then get helium-filled balloons so I can send it to him via air mail, watching as they disappear into the clouds. It’s something I do to remember him, and more importantly, it leaves me with a smile on my face,” says Murphy, a political activist, Coast Guard Captain, and Merchant Marine Officer living in Miami.

Tony died at the age of 38 of AIDS-related lymphoma on October 9, 2004. After months of misdiagnoses by his HIV/AIDS doctors, he was correctly diagnosed and then treated at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine’s Division of Infectious Diseases, part of UHealth – University of Miami Health System, under the care of Gordon M. Dickinson, M.D., chief of the division.
“Dr. Gordon Dickinson turned out to be quite unique in that he got very attached to Tony,” Murphy recalls. “He called me several times to see how I was doing, because during the illness and the many stages of the disease, Tony’s main concern was how I was going to fare once he was gone.”

Tony fought for 18 more months before lapsing into a coma.

“I believe Tony was gone a month before we let him go. None of his organs were working, but one day I just decided, ‘I want you to rest in peace,’” recalls Murphy.

Since then, the mother of three has donated $25,000 to the Division of Infectious Diseases to help fund ongoing research in HIV and other infectious diseases. “I would never want anyone to go through what I went through, so as long as there is research, there’s hope,” Murphy says.

Murphy gives back in so many other ways. As a mother who sat for endless hours in hospital waiting rooms while Tony was sick, she knows what a blessing it is to have reading material to pass the time. She now donates magazines to Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine to be used in the various waiting rooms.

She’s also training to become a grievance counselor, where she can impart her experiences and the lessons she’s learned from losing a child. One of those lessons is finding a way to free yourself to keep your loved one’s memory alive. For Murphy, that release came through philanthropy and the lift of a simple balloon.

“I was finally able to accept Tony’s death,” she says, “when I realized he could not rest in peace as long as I needed him to be here.”

**Division of Infectious Diseases**

The Division of Infectious Diseases, now comprised of 21 full-time faculty, staffs the major teaching hospitals at the medical center, including University of Miami Hospital, the University of Miami Hospital and Clinics (UMHC), Anne Bates Leach Eye Hospital, Jackson Memorial Hospital (Jackson), and the Miami Veterans Administration Medical Center (Miami VA). Three adjunct faculty at Mount Sinai Medical Center contribute to the teaching role of the division. Investigators in the division also conduct research at various locations.

The division provides quality patient care, conducts cutting-edge research, and educates physicians in the diagnosis, management, and treatment of patients with infectious diseases. Specific activities include primary care for an estimated 3,500 persons with HIV at Jackson clinics and the Miami VA, and treatment of serious complications in an active HIV-dedicated inpatient service at Jackson.

A private consultation clinic also operates at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center /UMHC–University of Miami Hospital & Clinics. Division faculty offer consultations for questions regarding the diagnosis or management of infections. The division also operates the Sexually Transmitted Disease Clinics of Miami-Dade County.

The division’s research arm is dynamic and covers a broad spectrum of first-class biomedical science, including studies in basic immunology; HIV disease (with an emphasis on therapeutic interventions); pathogenesis of streptococcal infections; molecular tracking of multi-drug resistant bacteria; transplant-associated infections; STDs in women with HIV; management of fungal infections and the evaluation of newer antifungal agents; and factors linked to access to care for persons with HIV infection.