

# Cuddles AND INNOVATION

Written by Nancy A. Ruhling | Photography courtesy of the Simms/Mann Institute

*Victoria Mann Simms uses stuffed animals and her foundation to bring healthy habits to families.*

Puppy Lovie, a soft, animal-shaped blanket with flip-floppy ears and a big heart attached to its chest, is lying on Victoria Mann Simms's desk. It's looking at her with endearing eyes; it's impossible not to pick it up and give it a hug. So she does. And breaks into a wide smile. Simms, a Los Angeles-based psychologist who specializes in early child development, created Puppy Lovie (and its CuddleBright Experience pals Bunny Lovie, Bear Lovie, and Elephant Lovie) as a way of translating the latest child development theory into a parenting tool designed to help parents nurture their child's social, emotional, and cognitive health from birth.

"CuddleBright facilitates bonding between babies and their caregivers," she says. "And these bonds are critical; science now shows that babies' earliest relationships and experiences can impact their health and wellness for life. Healthy bonds build healthy brains."

While the little ones snuggle with their plush pet, parents read them the accompanying board book, *A Cuddle Before I Go*, which encourages parents to skip sneaking out before periods of separation in favor

of taking the time to say goodbye, even when it means facing tears or tantrums.

This is important, Simms says, because consistent and predictable parenting has a calming effect, which, in turn, has a positive impact on the child's developing brain. "A simple hello-and-goodbye routine," she says, "eases separation anxiety for children and their parents."

The idea is simple: Learning to put words to feelings early helps the conversation continue as the child grows up and the dialogue shifts from hello and goodbye to other serious issues, like dating and drug use.

"The CuddleBright parenting guide helps mothers and fathers establish rituals and routines in their own parenting style," Simms explains. "The board book includes a silicone heart that the parents can take with them when they leave. It's a transitional object. If they FaceTime later to check in, the child can hold the book open to the page where it was attached. The child can touch that space as the parent holds the heart; it's about hearts touching hearts, even when apart."

Simms and her husband, real estate mogul Ronald A. Simms, know a lot about touching hearts.





Simms presents Dr. Patricia Kuhl and Dr. Andrew Meltzoff with the Simms-Mann Whole Child Award for community education.

Since they set up their Simms/Mann Family Foundation nearly a quarter of a century ago, they have given more than \$90 million to philanthropic causes, with a focus on three areas: medicine, education, and arts and culture.

“We’ve given the most to medicine and education by far,” Simms says, adding that the \$90 million is only an estimate of their continuing contributions and that she sees medicine and education as intertwined entities.

That’s why the foundation not only funds groundbreaking medical research, but also allocates significant dollars to programs that educate medical professionals and patients in a lifelong mind-body approach to wellness and health care.

“Medicine can be so siloed and so can education,” she remarks. “We focus on an integrative, holistic approach, which means transdisciplinary [research].”

To help transform health care and medical education, the Simmses have developed and funded a number of science-based integrative medicine programs.

Their Simms/Mann-UCLA Center for Integrative Oncology, which was founded 25 years ago and has helped some 390,000 people, is a national model for providing integrative care that takes into account the interconnection of physical, mental, and spiritual health.

In addition to oncology, the center’s menu of services includes psychosocial support, psychological care, and nutrition.

“I developed the center with the patients’ wellness in mind, focusing on quality of life,” Simms says. “It’s about treating the whole person—not just their cancer.”

The programs for patients and families are, for the most part, free of charge.

Since its naming in 2005, some 50,000 patients in California have been served by the Simms/Mann Health and Wellness Center at the Venice Family Clinic, the first integrative medicine treatment center in the world established at a free clinic. There, the entire person is treated holistically through a blend of conventional medical care and the alternative modalities of acupuncture, chiropractic, and osteopathy.

The clinic also offers activities that enhance well-being, including mental health support, stress management, nutrition and fitness education, and

obesity prevention and management.

The aim, Simms notes, is not only to aid individuals but to change the culture of the healthcare system by offering preventative services that patients and their families never had access to before.

The Simmses also support innovative research. Their organization funds a number of endowed chairs at various institutions, ranging from one for the developmental neurogenetics program at Children's Hospital Los Angeles's Institute for the Developing Mind to one in systems biology at City of Hope National Medical Center in Duarte, California.

Their Simms/Mann Institute for Education and Community Development, founded in 2011 with a focus on early child development, establishes and implements groundbreaking initiatives created by Simms to help close the information gap between those studying how early brains develop and those working in the 0-3 field, or the birth to three-years-old time frame.

The institute sponsors four major initiatives:

- The Simms/Mann Institute Think Tank, an annual event that brings together renowned neuroscience researchers from around the world to present their latest findings to some 500 pediatricians, OB-GYNs, nurses, educators, funders, and nonprofit leaders who work in the field of early child development.
- A \$25,000 Simms/Mann Institute Whole Child Award, which is presented annually in the categories of medicine, community, and visionary leadership to exceptional leaders

working across the field of 0-3 who implement a whole-child approach to care—that is, they treat cognitive, social, and emotional capacities as physiologically interdependent.

- The First 36 Project, a professional development fellowship program run in partnership with the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles and Builders of Jewish Education, which trains parent-and-me class facilitators in early child development theory and neuroscience research.
- The CuddleBright Experience parenting tool, which, so far, has been given to families through Children's Hospital Los Angeles, the Venice Family Clinic, El Nido Family Centers, Alliance of Moms, and Operation Shower, a national group that hosts baby showers for military mothers. The CuddleBright Experience can be bought online, and its net proceeds further support research and education in early child development.

Simms, who has a Ph.D. from the Graduate Center for Child Development and Psychotherapy in Los Angeles, is a hands-on philanthropist. As president of the Simms/Mann Family Foundation, she puts in at least 40 hours per week (when pressed, she admits it is usually more like 60) and is very involved in the design and development of programs.

"I do a lot of my creative thinking in the middle of the night," she says. "I get the ideas, and Ron, who still works full time in the real estate business, helps me implement them."

In the case of the Venice clinic, she woke Ron up at three in the morning and told him she wanted to set up a health center in Los Angeles for people who could not afford a wellness approach to medicine.

"I went over to the center for a year and helped choose the focus areas, which include obesity, chiropractic, and acupuncture," she says.

The creation of CuddleBright was more personal. Simms was writing a book on separation for her then two-year-old grandson when he came for a visit.

"I put my big foot next to his little foot, and I thought about parents today and how complicated it



is for them to stay connected to their children, what with so many parents both working, not to mention social media, texting, and smartphones,” she says. “The demands on families are different from when I raised my children. I wanted to teach today’s parents the importance of finding ways to bond despite these challenges, because it’s precisely these early-life relationships and experiences that enable children to adapt and become more resilient adults and parents themselves one day.”

For Simms, philanthropy has always been a family tradition. Her father’s parents were immigrants from Russia who arrived in the United States with nothing more than dreams. Nevertheless, her grandmother set up a *tzedakah* (charity) box in their house.

“They filled it with pennies,” she says. “My dad, the oldest of four, learned the value of giving back and became very philanthropic. He set up a family foundation that I later merged with ours.”

Ron’s grandparents, also penniless immigrants,

had similar ideas about charity that were passed down through the generations.

During their lifetimes, the Simmses intend to give away as much of their money as is possible in a responsible manner. “If we don’t have enough time to accomplish this,” Simms says, “our children are capable of continuing the mission for us.”

Simms has a lot of new philanthropic projects in the works, including a nursing training and fellowship program. “I like to develop cutting-edge, innovative programs,” she says. “It’s my passion.” **LM**

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Simms (right) shares the CuddleBright Parenting Guide with a new mom.