Congratulations to our 2013 Excellence in Stewardship Awardees

Nigella Hillgarth and Debbie Soldano are ambassadors who have built strong bonds between UC San Diego and our supporters. A little more about them...

Staff Award
Debbie Soldano, RN, BSN, OCN, UC Moores Cancer Center

Debbie Soldano refused to stand by as cuts in grant funds threatened Dr. Andrew Lowy’s advances in pancreatic and appendix cancer. She personally reached out to current and past patients and families across the country, involving them in Lowy’s research and how they could contribute to scientific progress. As a result, she has raised significant funds while building a community of supporters for this research at UC San Diego Moores Cancer Center.

Soldano has been Lowy’s nurse since the start of his practice, which opened in 1996 at The University of Cincinnati. When Lowy was recruited to UC San Diego in 2007, Debbie also relocated, leaving her home town, her family and her grown children. “It was a tough decision, but Dr. Lowy is a different caliber of doctor. We’re a team and our patients and their families think of us as a team. Our patients mean a lot to us and I know that Dr. Lowy means a lot to them. I believed that if we just asked our patients to support his research, they would be delighted to help. We just needed to ask. By following up and communicating with them, we can tell them, this wasn’t possible without you.”

Faculty/Campus Leader Award
Nigella Hillgarth, PhD
Executive Director, Birch Aquarium at Scripps

An outgoing woman with a passion for helping to shape the public’s perception of science and the environment, Nigella Hillgarth has quadrupled donations to Birch Aquarium since taking the helm in 2002. She exemplifies stewardship through her accessibility, her readiness to engage with her visitors and her willingness to listen to and act on ideas.

“Stewarding supporters is definitely one of the most rewarding things about being Executive Director of the Aquarium at UC San Diego,” says Hillgarth. “It is a joy and delight to spend time with people who are supporters of the work we do. These generous people are our partners at the Aquarium and across UC San Diego, and I learn so much from them. ”

Born in Tipperary, Ireland, Hillgarth is a distinguished zoologist who received her master’s and doctoral degrees from Oxford University, England. Her research focused on the behavior and physiology of pheasants, leading to her previous appointment as director of Tracy Aviary, the nation’s largest bird park, in Utah.

She serves on the board of governors for the Society for Conservation Biology, and past board appointments include the Association of Zoos & Aquariums, California Association of Museums and the Center for Research in Mathematics and Science Education. In 2012, she was awarded one of San Diego Business Journal’s “Women Who Means Business” awards and was recognized as one of six San Diego Women of the Year by San Diego Magazine.