“Making Life on Earth Better” is the Wertheim Family’s motto.

Nicole and I were delighted to meet and spend time with The Giving Pledge founders Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington a few months ago. Their invitation to the organization is welcomed and of great value in that it will enable us to collaborate and get to know other individuals and families who are making a positive difference with their ideas, wealth and time.

I was a 9th grade high school dropout with dyslexia from a disadvantaged home, a survivor of the Miami Juvenile Detention System for truancy. Today 60 years later with three doctorates, I am a 2011 Horatio Alger Medal of Distinguished Americans Awardee, the Chairman of the Florida International University (FIU) College of Medicine, Trustee Emeritus (after 30 years of service) to the University, and Honorary Chairman of the University Of Florida College Of Engineering. The invitation to join the Giving Pledge would have been unimaginable many years ago as a young man seeking his future, a true testament to the opportunities that only America can offer. My emancipator was Dr. Ben Shepard, a physician and juvenile judge who recognized something special in me and made it possible for me to enter the US Navy as part of a special juvenile program on my 17th birthday — a four-year stint that would be in lieu of my being transferred to the State Juvenile Detention Center. The Navy fed me, clothed me and educated me, and gave me the desire to go to college and become an electronics engineer. I subsequently became a NASA engineer working at Cape Canaveral in manned space flight, and became a friend of the original seven astronauts, including my lasting friend John Glenn. After becoming interested in the eye and the brain I received a State of Florida scholarship to get my doctorate in optometry, and became a visual neurologist. Looking back, I recognize that I would not have achieved the education and opportunities that I have had without the help of our public university education system. Giving back to public universities, so others may have the opportunities I received, has therefore been a longtime passion of mine.

As a clinician, researcher, entrepreneur, and founder of Brain Power Incorporated, the world's largest manufacturer of ophthalmic instruments and chemicals, I was able to improve the standard of care for eye health. My discovery as an eye doctor more than 40 years ago of the dangers of UV and blue light, and the meticulous incorporation of sight saving filters into eyeglass lenses, has helped prevent cataracts and macular degeneration in millions of people each year. Furthermore, my continuous sight saving research and subsequent products developed by me and my teams have been recognized and honored by many organizations and institutions, and have resulted in the awarding of more than 100 patents and trademarks.

The Wertheim Family Foundation, of which I am Chairman, has funded hundreds of domestic and foreign charities, projects, and organizations since its established almost 40 years ago, including major
exhibits at Zoo Miami, construction of Vail, Colorado Public Radio station KPRE, Florida International University's 1000-seat Herbert and Nicole Wertheim Concert and Performing Arts Center, FIU's Horticultural Research Conservatory, the establishment of The Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine at FIU in 2006, and major funding for The Nicole Wertheim College of Nursing and Health Sciences at FIU in 2012. The Foundation's newest project is the $300 million University of Florida collaborative initiative Herbert Wertheim College of Engineering, including the soon to be completed 100,000 square foot Herbert Wertheim Laboratory for Engineering Excellence.

Each year my wife Nicole and I, along with our two daughters, Erica Wertheim Zohar and Vanessa Von Wertheim, both Foundation members, dedicate substantial time and talent to support the Foundation’s awarding and fundraising efforts for more than a hundred scholarships, fellowships, professorships, and financial aid programs in medicine, nursing and related healthcare, performing arts and engineering, including the most recent Million Dollar Horatio Alger Engineering Scholarship Program at the University of Florida.

Many of America’s private universities have more than 20 times the endowments of most public institutions of higher learning, and our state legislators are decreasing funding to these public institutions that needs to be made up by private funding. Our family’s talent, time and energy will be dedicated to The Wertheim Family Foundation’s future efforts to support the endowments of public universities and colleges.

Herbert Wertheim OD, D.Sc., M.D. (hc)    Nicole Laurenti Wertheim