

2021 Sylvester Retreat: Milestones Achieved; Goals Set

The pandemic did not stop Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center from reaching milestones in care, growth and research in 2021. And COVID-19 will not prevent the National Cancer Institute (NCI) designated cancer center from reaching transformative new heights in 2022, according to Sylvester's Director Stephen D. Nimer, M.D., who delivered the opening remarks during Sylvester's 2021 Annual Retreat, November 19 and 20 at the Ritz-Carlton in Coconut Grove.



Stephen D. Nimer, M.D., presenting at Sylvester's 2021 Annual Retreat.

"There ain't no stopping us now," was the cancer center's theme at the Town Hall talk in 2020, the year after receiving NCI's designation, and again this year at the annual research retreat.



The NCI designation in 2019 was a moment, which started a movement that unleashed a wave of important publications, funding, cancer center recruiting, growth and quality patient care to come. Sylvester's 2019 Cancer Center Support Grant (CCSG) for NCI-designated Cancer Centers was fully funded for five years and the NCI lauded the center's remarkable strengths in community outreach and diversity, equity and inclusion.

The present belongs to Sylvester and the people dedicating their lives to advancing the cancer center's work, Dr. Nimer, Oscar de la Renta Endowed Chair in Cancer Research, said to an in-person audience of over 250 Sylvester cancer investigators over the two days.

Sylvester continues to address critical issues within the cancer center's catchment area, South Florida and beyond. Miami and South Florida are on track to become a global technology hub and Sylvester has a similar trajectory gaining momentum and recognition as a leader among cancer centers, according to Dr. Nimer.

"We have told the NCI, the Cancer Letter, the whole cancer community, that we are undergoing a real transformation at Sylvester. A transformation of our culture, our facilities, our shared resources, our multidisciplinary research programs, our capabilities. A transformation that allows us to conduct the very best cancer research and take superior care of our patients," he said.

"This transformation is yours!" Dr. Nimer told the audience. "You own it!"



Maria Figueroa, M.D.,
presenting on NCI Aging and
Cancer Research Priorities.

In 2020 and '21—years defined by the pandemic—Sylvester recruited key leaders and faculty members, published hundreds of articles on cutting-edge science, and gained further NCI grant funding now totaling \$11.7 million. Examples of NCI funded research was on display at the retreat, where Sylvester investigators presented 125 different posters.

The Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees approved funds to build new and renovate clinical and research facilities that support Sylvester's mission.

Strategic collaborations expanded the cancer center's access to leading edge technology and big data infrastructure. Pratim Biswas, Ph.D., M.S., dean of the College of Engineering at the University of Miami, gave an overview of opportunities to collaborate on the use of artificial intelligence to drive drug discovery innovation and delivery. Stephan C. Schürer, Ph.D., professor and interim director, Drug Discovery, Center for Computational Science, at UM, discussed how accessing Sylvester's Big Data Portal, a novel multi-omics data management and analytics research platform, will be part of



the cancer center's transformation.

Sylvester's Biospecimen Shared Resource (BSSR) has grown, now holding more than 6,000 high quality, well-characterized cancer and related human tissue specimens and biological materials to drive center research.

Sylvester has grown clinically in recent years by providing more life-saving therapies, as evidenced by the Comprehensive Treatment Unit's 30% growth in the last two years.



From left, Sana Chaudhry, Ph.D., candidate, Maurizio Affer, M.S., and Justin Taylor, M.D., at the Sylvester Retreat.

Faculty speaking at the retreat pointed to Sylvester's partnerships and connection with the richly diverse South Florida community. The Sylvester Office of Outreach and Engagement has ten full-time staff who mirror the area's racial diversity, including in languages spoken. Staff provide cancer education, screening and outreach.

The work at Sylvester is getting national and worldwide



attention. The World Health Organization (WHO) designated the University of Miami as the first WHO Collaborating Centre for Cervical Cancer Elimination in November 2021. The recognition was spurred by a program led by Erin Kobetz, Ph.D., M.P.H., associate director of Population Sciences and Cancer Disparity at Sylvester, which addresses higher cervical cancer rates in the Haitian community in Miami with screenings and vaccines.

And the White House Office of Public Engagement selected Brandon Mahal, M.D., assistant professor of radiation oncology and assistant director of Community Outreach and Engagement at Sylvester, to participate in its newly formed Health Equity Leaders Roundtable Series.

Sylvester has important new projects in the pipeline for 2022 and clear directions for continued growth and improvement.

Craig H. Moskowitz, M.D., physician-in-chief for the oncology service line, outlined steps for optimizing site disease groups, which he noted are directly linked to a cancer center's success. Dr. Moskowitz pointed to such things as a need for Sylvester to focus more on investigator-initiated trials to increase funding.

Ola Landgren, M.D., Ph.D., chief of the Myeloma Program and Co-leader of the Tumor Biology Research Program, and holder of the Paul J. DiMare Endowed Chair in Immunotherapy, presented on the emergence of an Experimental and Translational Oncology research program, highlighting its strengths including internal drug development efforts.

Dr. Nimer encouraged attendees to "think big" about the future direction of the cancer center in three breakout sessions: aging and cancer, infection and cancer, and immuno-oncology.



Not only did faculty identify areas of need and opportunities, but they presented ways to optimize their efforts by establishing additional resources, multidisciplinary collaborations and grant opportunities.

Each accomplishment is not simply a moment but a movement to transform Sylvester in its path to achieve even greater success, Dr. Nimer said.

Content Type article