Gabriela Pura Suarez
July 10, 2019

Dr. Justin Watts Honored with the Pap Corps Endowed Professorship in Leukemia

In the battle to fight cancer, and to identify cures that not only save patients but also improve their quality of life, Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of Miami Leonard M. Miller School of Medicine and the Pap Corps, Champions for Cancer Research, have forged a remarkable partnership close to 70 years strong. This was evident on the evening of June 27, in the Lois Pope LIFE Center, when Justin Watts, M.D., received the Pap Corps Endowed Professorship in Leukemia.

From left, Dean Henri R. Ford, Linda Moses,

Dr. Justin Watts, Dr. Sara Iobst, and Dr. Stephen D. Nimer.

Thanking his mentors, colleagues, staff and family members, Dr. Watts, an assistant professor in the Department of Medicine, Division of Hematology-Oncology at the Miller School, talked about his ambitious goals. “My mission is to design and develop the next generation of drug therapies and precision medicine platforms that will be less toxic and cure more leukemia patients," he said.

One could say that Dr. Watts was born to make his mark in medicine. His father, Ray Watts, M.D., is president of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, after serving as senior vice president and dean of the School of Medicine at UAB, as well as chair of neurology. He attended the ceremony, along with his wife, Nancy, a retired UAB nurse, and Dr. Justin Watts’ wife, Sara Iobst, M.D., medical director at Camillus Health Concern.

Dr. Justin Watts earned his undergraduate degree at Emory University in 2002, and then his medical degree from the Emory University School of Medicine in 2007, graduating magna cum laude. He completed his residency at the University of California, San Francisco, and he has done fellowships in hematology and oncology at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York and Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center.

It was at Sloan Kettering that Dr. Watts first came to the attention of Stephen D. Nimer, M.D., who was then the Alfred P. Sloan Chair of Cancer Research and head of the division of hematologic oncology at Sloan Kettering. After Dr. Nimer became director of Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, Dr.

Watts' reputation as an "amazing, very hardworking, and very dedicated physician" prompted Dr. Nimer to recruit him to work with Ronan T. Swords, M.D., Ph.D., the first recipient of the Pap Corps endowed professorship.

After joining UM in 2014, Dr. Watts worked alongside Dr. Swords, who departed in 2018, and he has since continued the active trials and robust clinical and translational leukemia research programs at Sylvester, focusing on acute leukemias, myelodysplastic syndromes, and myeloproliferative neoplasms. More than 240 patients have been treated through his clinical trials, and he has published and presented extensively. In addition, he has received numerous grants and awards for his research, including from the National Institutes of Health.

The endowed professorship, one of the most important academic honors a faculty member can receive, will allow him to secure funding for his research and clinical trials. "Dr. Watts is a tenure-track investigator who has created a robust leukemia research program at the University of Miami," said Linda Moses, chair of the board of directors of the Pap Corps. "I enthusiastically applaud Dr. Watts for his appointment to the path of endowed professorship in leukemia."

From left, Dr. Edward Abraham, Dr. Justin Watts and Dr. Ray Watts.

The Pap Corps (named after Dr. George Papanicolaou, who introduced the Pap smear in 1928), was started by five visionary women in 1952, who were driven by a lack of early detection and treatment of cancer. Today, it is South Florida's largest volunteer fundraising organization with more than 22,000 members and 52 chapters, and it has raised more than $110 million for cancer research, including a historic $50 million pledge to Sylvester in 2016.

"The Pap Corps allows scholars like Dr. Watts to continue their groundbreaking cancer research in perpetuity, and to discover new treatments and cures to fight cancer," said Henri R. Ford, M.D., M.H.A., dean and chief academic officer of the Miller School of Medicine. "They are a testament to what can be accomplished by an unwavering determination to find

solutions, and we couldn’t be more grateful for their tireless support.”

All of the funds raised by Pap Corps at their events—and they host more than 400 events annually—benefit Sylvester directly, something that Edward Abraham, M.D., executive vice president for health affairs and CEO of UHealth, acknowledged. “Your impact on our community and generations of residents fighting cancer is unmatched,” he said to Moses and other Pap Corps board members in the audience.

Dr. Abraham also spoke about UHealth’s vision to be an exceptional provider of care and to bring cutting-edge treatments and top physicians to patients where they live. It is because of the strong partnership between the Pap Corps and Sylvester that UHealth has been able to open seven locations throughout South Florida, including one at Deerfield Beach, which is designated as the Pap Corps campus.

Patient care is also something that Dr. Watts cares deeply about. He reflected on the impact his patients have made on him, and he spoke about their struggles and successes to illustrate his commitment to finding better treatments. “One of my goals has been to bring the most promising investigational new agents into the lab, such as the FT-2102, which is an IDH inhibitor taken as a single pill once a day. Unlike chemotherapy, it has shown minimal side effects,” he said.

“Justin has been creating an infrastructure that will serve him well for his research,” Dr. Nimer said. In addition to the NIH support Dr. Watts received, Dr. Nimer praised the relationships he has developed with other leukemia foundations such as Gabrielle’s Angel Foundation and PhRMA, which

represents the country’s leading biopharmaceutical research companies supporting the search for new treatments and cures.

“Finding treatments and cures for leukemia is one of the most difficult areas of medicine,” Dr. Nimer said. “Patients are very sick and the treatments are difficult. All of us who work with Justin can attest to his humanity, and he has really been fulfilling the life of a physician-scientist.”