Julie Levin
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Dr. Mario Stevenson Is Awarded the Raymond F. Schinazi and Family Endowed Chair in Biomedicine

Driven by a shared love of science and a passion for finding a permanent cure for HIV/AIDS, longtime colleagues and friends Raymond F. Schinazi, Ph.D., and Mario Stevenson, Ph.D., have taken a crucial step in ensuring continuity in lifesaving research at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine to prevent and treat infectious diseases.

Dr. Stevenson, a renowned expert in molecular virology, was officially installed as the inaugural holder of the Raymond F. Schinazi and Family Endowed Chair in Biomedicine during a recent dedication ceremony in Coral Gables. The honor was made possible by Dr. Schinazi, his wife, Nadira, and their family. Dr. Schinazi is best known for his pioneering work in antiviral drug development for HIV, HBV, HCV, and other pathogens.

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Mario Stevenson, Ph.D., accepts the Raymond F. Schinazi and Family Endowed Chair in Biomedicine during a ceremony May 9 in Coral Gables.

"The greatest history between Mario and myself is our love for science, working on HIV and other viruses," said Dr. Schinazi, who is the Frances Winship Walters Professor of Pediatrics and director of the Laboratory of Biochemical Pharmacology at Emory University, and co-director of the HIV Cure Scientific Working Group for the Emory University Center for AIDS Research. "Some of Mario's work in this area early on was fundamental in terms of a potential cure for HIV, which has eluded us all so far."

For Dr. Stevenson, who has made dramatic advancements in understanding HIV/AIDS, the chair gives him and the researchers that follow him the freedom to pursue novel ideas to deliver better treatments. It is work that is particularly important in Miami-Dade County, where a diverse population and clusters of HIV infections have created one of the nation’s most challenging battlegrounds for preventing viral

transmissions.

“I believe a cure for HIV/AIDS is realistic and is within reach,” said Dr. Stevenson, professor, director of the HIV and Emerging Infectious Diseases Institute, and co-director of the Center for AIDS Research at the Miller School. “I intend to use this endowment to continue my work in that area – in particular, understanding how the virus can evade elimination by the overwhelming antiviral regimens used against it.”

Collaboration and Friendship

The chair presentation resulted from a unique collaboration that has been years in the making. In addition to being longtime friends – Dr. Stevenson served as Dr. Schinazi’s best man at his wedding and Dr. Schinazi is godfather to Dr. Stevenson's daughter – the two have both made their life’s work developing lifesaving treatments for infectious diseases. There is also a strong connection to the University of Miami. Nadira Schinazi earned her M.B.A. from UM in 2008 and the Schinazis’ daughter, Nadine, graduated in 2010 with a degree in business administration.

One of the world’s foremost leaders in nucleoside chemistry, Dr. Schinazi is known for developing new therapies for patients with HIV/AIDS. Most of the HIV-infected individuals in the United States on combination therapy take at least one of the drugs Dr. Schinazi invented.

Now the chair he has established delivers the new potential to transform care and treatment for those who have HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, and other viruses for generations to come.

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Chair Will Fuel ‘Visionary Research’

“It’s extraordinary philanthropic leaders like Dr. Schinazi and his family whose dedication has led us to the highest echelons of excellence in our pursuit of a winning strategy against HIV/AIDS, and that pursuit can only be fueled by visionary research like that of Dr. Mario Stevenson,” said UM President Julio Frenk. “We are incredibly appreciative of this generosity.”

Nadira Schinazi, M.B.A. ’08, and Raymond F. Schinazi, Ph.D.

The endowment will allow Dr. Stevenson to continue his research, which has defined the fundamental features of HIV that make it unique among retroviruses, as well as the principles that underscore HIV's ability to establish a lifelong infection in the host, something that is helping to focus the strategies for a cure.

"I want to thank the Schinazi family for this research

support, which will accelerate the University's trajectory as a world leader in preventing and fighting infectious diseases," said Jeffrey Duerk, executive vice president for academic affairs and provost. "We are so proud of Dr. Stevenson and his team, and immensely grateful to Dr. Schinazi and his family for their generosity in establishing this gift."

Accolades for a Distinguished Career

Dr. Stevenson's accomplishments were touted throughout the endowed chair presentation, which took place at the Hyatt Regency in Coral Gables on May 9 and was attended by his wife, Clessia, and daughters, Victoria and Rebecca, as well as friends, colleagues, and University dignitaries.

Dr. Stevenson earned his Ph.D. in Glasgow, Scotland, and has been working on the viral etiology of AIDS for more than 30 years. Through his research, he has provided insight into the mechanisms regulating HIV replication, persistence, and disease pathogenesis. Before coming to UM, he was the David Freelander Chair for AIDS Research at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and the director of the Center for AIDS Research.

Among his achievements, Dr. Stevenson has served as chair of the HIV/AIDS Virology Study Section at the National Institutes of Health, and of the Scientific Advisory Board of the National AIDS Conference; served on the NIH Office of AIDS Research that sets AIDS research directives; and is currently a member of the Board of Trustees of the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR), and a scientific board member of the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation.

Calling an endowed chair the highest academic honor that a university can bestow on a faculty member, Henri R. Ford, M.D., M.H.A., dean and chief academic officer of the Miller School, spoke of the enormous potential. "Endowed chairs allow exemplary scholars, such as Dr. Stevenson, to continue their groundbreaking research in perpetuity and allow them to discover new treatments and cures to fight cancer and other illnesses."

Dedication to Continue HIV/AIDS Research

Roy E. Weiss, M.D., Ph.D., chief medical officer, ambulatory services for UHealth and chair of the Department of Medicine at the Miller School, had the privilege of introducing Stevenson and presenting him with a medallion recognizing him as the inaugural recipient of the Schinazi endowed chair. He also credited Dr. Stevenson's work as a significant reason he chose to come to UM.

"He had the largest portfolio of grants anywhere in the University," said Dr. Weiss, the Rabbi Morris I. Esformes Endowed Chair in Medicine and Endocrinology, and Kathleen and Stanley Glaser Distinguished Chair. "I was mesmerized by his ability to understand science and always put people first. This chair is a generous and well-deserved commitment to Dr. Stevenson's single-minded dedication to finding the cures and giving our patients new hope."

Researchers like Drs. Stevenson and Schinazi have created antiviral drugs that can suppress HIV/AIDS, but they will not be satisfied until they find a cure. Dr. Stevenson says the endowed chair is an inspiration.

"Having a chair in Ray's name is special to me; it is humbling

and sobering," said Dr. Stevenson. "Ray has had a greater impact on the infectious diseases afflicting humans than any living scientist. So, having a chair associated with him is a lot to live up to. I promise to try and live up to the honor."

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