

# INVESTING IN HOPE



## Gratitude, Love of Learning Spark Gift to Support Clinical Research Education

**A former UVA doctor who helped raise the profile of cancer care in Charlottesville** is giving UVA Health another boost, this time in the form of educational opportunities within the School of Medicine.

Dr. Geoffrey Weiss and his wife, Martha, have established the Weiss Family Bicentennial Fellowship, which will enable young doctors to specialize in the clinical investigation of hematology and oncology care.

“I’ve had the privilege to train over 100 fellows in my 30-plus-year career,” says Dr. Weiss, who served for many years as the Cancer

Center’s medical director and chief of the Division of Hematology/Oncology, “so nothing is more gratifying than continuing to support the development of young clinical investigators—that is, other than the birth of my kids and my marriage to Martha.”

The gift is also being amplified by UVA through the Bicentennial Scholars Fund Matching Program, which is a University-wide effort to increase scholarship opportunities for students.

“We’re enormously thrilled that the University has contributed matching funds to this fellowship,” he says, “a step that will leverage

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## FROM THE DIRECTOR

**To build a better cancer center, we** have to take a few concrete steps. We need more room for patients to comfortably and easily receive the care they need, we need to increase the number of clinical trials we offer, and we need to recruit the star researchers who are poised to make the next great breakthrough.

But building a better cancer center also means thinking beyond just the walls of our current space in downtown Charlottesville. We must improve our service to all Virginians, no matter where in the Commonwealth they reside. This is how we honor the future.

UVA's *Honor the Future* campaign will make great leaps in scientific discovery possible. From developing the next great cancer therapies, to preparing the next generation of physician-scientists, to improving health outcomes for all people living with cancer, we are ready to pursue the answers that we once thought out-of-reach.

In this issue of *Investing in Hope*, you will meet faculty who are working tirelessly to find the answers we need today, as well as some of our donors, whose generosity we will translate into the solutions for tomorrow. I am humbled to do this work with such driven and dedicated colleagues and supporters.

Thank you,  
Tom Loughran

## FOR THIS UVA DOCTOR, CANCER CARE IS PERSONAL

**A few years ago, Dr. Nicole Kelleher won** the Charlottesville Women's Four Miler, one of her many feats as a former professional triathlete.

However, as the UVA Cancer Center's physical medicine and rehabilitation doctor prepared for this year's race, instead of focusing on having the fastest time, her main goals were to raise money to support breast cancer research at UVA, and to survive her own recent cancer diagnosis.

On March 18, 2019, Dr. Kelleher—who attended UVA for medical school, and who completed her residency here prior to joining the faculty—learned that she had a form of breast cancer that required a double mastectomy.



Fortunately, because of her family's history of cancer, she was already a patient at UVA's High-Risk Breast and Ovarian Cancer Program, one of the nation's first such dedicated programs and the only one of its kind in Central Virginia.

Dr. Kelleher became a patient at the High-Risk Program in her 30s, after losing her mother and two grandparents to cancer. For years the personalized screening she received—which included genetic testing

and regular MRI scans—showed no cancer. Then, when she stopped breastfeeding her youngest son, cancer appeared.

"If one just looked at Nicole's negative genetic testing, it is possible that someone could have missed her incredibly high-risk status and simply had her doing regular cancer screenings starting at 40 or 50," says Dr. Susan Modesitt, who directs UVA's High-Risk Program.

"I cannot tell you how grateful I am to the High-Risk Program and everyone at the Cancer Center," says Dr. Kelleher, adding special thanks to her department chair, Dr. Robert Wilder, and her colleague Dr. Regan Royer, both of whom offered Dr. Kelleher incredible levels of emotional support, and even stepped in to cover Dr. Kelleher's patients during her recovery. "Thanks to them, I am very likely to watch my cherished children grow and to see them graduate high school and college."

With time constraints and growing patient caseloads, Dr. Kelleher knows firsthand that the pressures of practicing medicine can sometimes challenge a doctor's ability to have the empathy that each patient deserves. This experience, she says, has changed that.

"While I know that I've always given my patients good care, my investment in giving them a more personal degree of care has really gone up," says Dr. Kelleher, who cares for patients experiencing musculoskeletal and neurological problems following cancer treatment.

Dr. Kelleher knows she will have to continue to be diligent about her health, as colon and ovarian cancer also run in her family. But she also knows that she has the support of a family that extends well beyond a bloodline.

"Despite being here for the last 12 years," she says, "I have never felt more a part of the UVA family."

## BLENDING RESEARCH AND PATIENT CARE



**Dr. Indumathy Varadarajan** found her calling at a young age. She was very close to her grandmother, who passed away from acute myeloid leukemia (AML) when Dr. Varadarajan was a child. From that moment on, she knew that she wanted to find a cure so other families didn't have to face the same loss.

Now a physician-scientist at UVA Cancer Center, Dr. Varadarajan specializes in treating life-threatening blood diseases by combining cellular therapies with advanced stem cell transplant techniques. The results have been incredible. Patients enrolled in her clinical trial have lived longer and experienced a higher quality of life.

This year UVA Cancer Center reached the milestone of completing the center's 500th stem cell transplant.

"This is very important to us, because it shows the commitment of the whole team, including the nurse coordinators, the hospital's medical staff team, and the commitment that the patients have shown to us," says Dr. Varadarajan.

UVA has a long tradition of discovery research that has changed how we care for patients. From using nanotechnology to deliver the first new drug for AML in 30 years directly to cancer cells, to treating breast cancer patients with a single dose of radiation at the time of their surgery, UVA investigators are relentless in their pursuit of answers.

"UVA has this unique combination of providing patients a personalized relationship with their physician and the entire medical care team, and this combines with cutting-edge research," says Dr. Varadarajan. "I learn a lot from every patient experience, both as a person and as a physician, and I'm not sure how many patients know that when they come to us for treatment they help improve care for the next patient who follows them."

 Jackson Smith

## AREA CAR SHOW DRIVES SUPPORT FOR PATIENTS WITH CANCER

Nearly 1,400 people gathered at the Boar's Head Resort in Charlottesville on Labor Day weekend for a unique automotive experience.

The second annual Virginia Festival of the Wheel—a classic car show benefitting the UVA Cancer Center—brought together enthusiasts from across the Commonwealth to celebrate the role that the automobile has played in Virginia's progress.

"We're blessed to have the UVA Cancer Center in our community," says Michael Baldauf, the event's organizer. "The impact they have on the lives of people from across the state who are dealing with this disease is amazing."

And Baldauf speaks from experience. Only three weeks after being diagnosed with cancer, his wife received what he describes as care and treatment that "was exceptional at every level."

"From all of the support staff to our surgeon, Dr. Susan Modesitt, who we now think of as family, and all the way up to the director, Dr. Tom Loughran, we're grateful for the quality of the care and for the compassion they showed us," says Baldauf.

In total, the festival—which featured 90 cars—raised approximately \$30,000 to support UVA Cancer Center patients.

"The Charlottesville community really showed their support for this year's event, which exceeded all expectations," says Baldauf. "Our goal is to assist patients and their families during treatment

so they can live normal lives after treatment—we are gratified by the community's support."

The weekend included the Jefferson Trail Tour, which saw many of the classic cars cruising the Western Albemarle County countryside, as well as a Saturday reception and live auction.

"We couldn't be more grateful to the Virginia Festival of the Wheel for their commitment to our patients," says Julie Speasmaker, who chairs the Cancer Center Advisory Board. "Their efforts makes tangible differences during a challenging time in someone's life."


As for the future, Baldauf says, he and his team have already starting planning for next year, which will again be held at the Boar's Head Resort on Labor Day Weekend.

**30,000  
dollars**

**1,400  
people**

**90  
cars**



 Joshua Crane



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our gift to maximize its benefit. The Cancer Center has been on an upward trajectory for some time, so it is a privilege for us to make a contribution to that success."

Dr. Weiss is a physician who spent his career treating patients and developing trials of new cancer therapies. Taking the knowledge that basic scientists discover at the bench, he says, and applying it to patient care and studying its impact, is the only path to making progress in cancer care.

## 112%

**The growth in UVA's clinical trial program in the last four years.**

Recognizing that a shortage of clinical researchers is projected for the next decade, he hopes that this gift will attract young doctors to UVA, where they can acquire the skills they'll need to enter a career in academic medicine and clinical investigation.

The Weiss family came to UVA in 2004, when Dr. Weiss became the chief of the Division of Hematology/Oncology. Among his many notable accomplishments was helping transition UVA's cancer programs into the Emily Couric Clinical Cancer Center building.

But Dr. Weiss isn't the only member of his family dedicated to supporting cancer patients. Martha, a former psychiatric nurse, is active in the Patients & Friends Steering Committee. She also volunteers with the UVA Hospital Auxiliary, helping patients in the Cancer Center, and serving as the Auxiliary's liaison to the Cancer Center Advisory Board.

"We thought this award would allow fellows to engage in cancer clinical research," she says, "and receive a career boost to compete for positions at UVA or other first-rate institutions."

While Dr. Weiss now devotes much of his time in retirement to new pursuits—he's written one novel and is at work on a second—the teaching and learning of medicine remain close to his heart.

He is grateful for the mentorship of innumerable physician-leaders during his early career. And, of course, there are the young doctors he trained, many of whom are now successful clinical researchers and leaders of their own programs.

"I remember them, they remember me, and when our paths cross," he says, "it's a moment of extraordinary pride for me."

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