

Bringing a 'UF thing', to USF

Dr. Joe Lezama's gift for inspiring students, residents and patients can be traced back to his days at the College of Medicine.

By Cindy Spence, UF TODAY



Photo by Priscilla Santos

Dr. Joe Lezama could line the walls of his office at the James A. Haley Veterans Administration Hospital with dozens of awards for teaching and medicine, polished wood and brass proclamations to his success as one of the youngest chiefs of medicine in the United States.

But the walls of Lezama's office tell a different story.

There's a crayon poster from his daughter's elementary school: "Thank you Dr. Lezama for helping the peapl of Hatty," presented after he spoke to her class about January's earthquake in Haiti and how Tampa hospitals helped.

There are reminders of patients who were too sick to cure, like a stuffed mannequin that rode the back of one patient's wheelchair, and the Buffalo Bills pennant from a patient who wanted to enjoy one last Super Bowl at home with his family before he died.

There's a family photo of Lezama with his wife, Amy, son Derek, 4, and daughter Kaitlyn, 7, a reminder — albeit unnecessary — of his family-first credo. To his kids, M.D. stands for "my Daddy," as a small plaque on the wall proclaims.

And here, in the green-and-gold heart of University of South Florida Bulls territory, are orange-and-blue tokens, reminders of where his journey into medicine began.

"I wanted to be a Gator since the eighth grade," Lezama said. It was "love at first sight" when he landed on campus in the University of Florida Honors Program as a freshman. That year, at a pre-med meeting, he set his sights on the UF College of Medicine and never looked back.

"I learned a lot about camaraderie and how medicine is a team effort," Lezama said. "We learned about humanism in the classroom, but we also saw it personified in practice when we shadowed our teachers. Today, I try to exemplify the model of medicine I learned at the university, caring and compassionate."

Lezama left Gainesville for his birthplace, Tampa, to complete his residency in internal medicine at USF, where he quickly established a reputation as a physician who medical students could emulate and learn from, one who places a high value on connecting with his patients.

The human touch has served Lezama well as a hospitalist whose focus is on veterans, many disabled and worn down by war.

"The veterans have always been my favorite patients. These are war heroes and so grateful," Lezama said. "With my veterans, the patient-doctor relationship is so easy to establish."

Notice he didn't say doctor-patient. With Lezama, the patient comes first, something that endeared Lezama to Sue Phillips, whose husband, Wayne Phillips Jr., was a veteran of the Vietnam War and 100 percent disabled. He began treatments at the VA in 2000 and died in 2005.

"Every time my husband had to go to the hospital, we would call ahead and see if Dr. Lezama was there," Sue said. "He wouldn't go unless Dr. Lezama was there."

Like many veterans, Wayne suffered from a litany of ailments: heart, lungs, kidneys, diabetes. "You name it, he had it," Sue said.

Lezama, whose specialty is internal medicine, particularly enjoys planning treatments by specialists in coordinating care for his patients. At the nation's busiest VA hospital, it's like being the quarterback of a medical team. But the patients are more than medical mysteries to him. He sits with them at their bedsides, trading stories and telling jokes, and calls family members to update them on their loved one's care.

"There were a lot of good memories, a lot of bad memories," said Sue, whose husband is the source of the Buffalo Bills pennant prominently posted in Lezama's office. "And in the end, how many doctors would send flowers?"



Lezama's rapport with his patients inspires resident Francisco Torano, one of the students who nominated Lezama for the 2007 Humanism in Medicine Award by the Association of American Medical Colleges. He was one of only 42 physicians nominated.

Joe Lezama, MD '97, is known for his ability to motivate and inspire younger physicians, evidenced by his numerous teaching awards. Internal medicine residents at the University of South Florida have voted him Teacher of the Year for five years. Photo by Priscilla Santos

"He has a bedside manner like no other. When he is with a patient, he is with that patient 100 percent," Torano said. "He's the doctor everybody wishes they could be."

Lezama, 38, was a natural mentor for Torano. Aside from medicine, the two share strong Cuban-American roots and the work ethic that accompanies those roots. Lezama grew up around his immigrant grandparents, watching them overcome adversity with a positive attitude, all the while nurturing strong family and community connections.

Torano is on USF's wildly successful Medical Jeopardy team, state champs three years running and now headed to nationals. The key to the team's success, Torano said, is Coach Lezama and his teaching. A Lezama-coached team has never lost to UF in Medical Jeopardy, although Lezama credits UF with stoking his competitive fire.

"As a coach, it's so hard to go up against the Gators, I almost go home wondering who I am really. But we're at our best in competition with UF," said Lezama, adding, "Competition — it's definitely a University of Florida thing."

Mentorship is also a UF thing, and over the years Lezama has turned to Dr. Ricardo Gonzalez-Rothi, a UF professor of medicine and pharmacy who says he knew his "bright-eyed, bushy-tailed" student would succeed, and mentor others in turn.

"I look at mentorship like a virus. When I first came (to UF) as a resident, I was infected with that sort of passion, and I infected Joe, and he's infected an awful lot of people as well," said Gonzalez-Rothi, adding that the adviser now seeks advice. "The thing I enjoy most is that we're colleagues. I am now calling him, and it's a wonderful feeling to call and ask him what he thinks, ask him to advise me."

His community roots in Tampa are important to him, Lezama said, so when he was asked to help coordinate disaster response by Tampa Bay area hospitals, naturally he said yes. In the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake, Lezama made sure he was at the airport to meet C-130s and direct patients to the hospitals best suited to care for them.

How does he do it all? An early indication of his seemingly boundless energy hangs on his office wall. The small plaque is from Lezama's Little League days. It says, "Mr. Hustle."

"Medicine is like that," Lezama said, "always hustling down the first baseline, giving 10 percent more to your 100 percent effort."

Mr. Hustle is now Dr. Hustle.