



Whatever you choose to do, be the very best at it. If you're a chef, work in a three-star Michelin restaurant. If you become a housekeeper, rise to the top and own the whole company. If you play the piano, be the accomplished concert pianist on the center of the stage.

Meet Dr. Christine Chung

Empathy And Ambition Merge, Giving Voice To Patients With Head And Neck Cancer

By Michelle Bearden

DR. CHRISTINE CHUNG'S SECURE LIFE AS SHE KNEW IT ENDED ABRUPTLY AT AGE 16.

Her mother, seeking a better future for her children, moved from South Korea to America with her daughter and two sons. They settled in Los Angeles, where they had some extended family. It was supposed to be a new beginning, but Dr. Chung didn't feel that way. She couldn't speak English and was overwhelmed by the strange new culture.

Back home in South Korea, she had been the smart kid leading the class. Now she was unsure of herself and reserved, qualities that got misinterpreted by her peers. If they noticed her at all, they mistakenly dismissed her as not very bright.

In those difficult years, Dr. Chung held dearly to her mother's words: Whatever you choose to do, be the very best at it. If you're a chef, work in a three-star Michelin restaurant. If you become a housekeeper, rise to the top and own the whole company. If you play the piano, be the accomplished concert pianist on the center of the stage.

That advice would help chart the course of her remarkable career in research and medicine.

In September 2015, Dr. Chung made her mother proud again when she left her post as associate professor in the Department of Oncology at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and joined Moffitt Cancer Center as chair of the Department of Head and Neck-Endocrine Oncology.

"Dr. Chung has excellent ideas about the future developments of head and neck-endocrine cancer care," said Louis Harrison, M.D., chair of the Department of Radiation Oncology and part of the search committee that hired Dr. Chung. "She shares Moffitt's focus on the importance of the multidisciplinary approach to these diseases."

Dr. Harrison describes her as a "nationally recognized leader in the field who has a great intellect and is driven by a passion for outstanding clinical care and innovative research."

Dr. Chung has settled in quickly, already a fan of jogging along Bayshore Boulevard to keep fit. More importantly, she feels very fortunate to be a part of her new Moffitt team.

"An incredible opportunity," Dr. Chung says. "Moffitt's reputation was a big factor in coming here. And I've since learned that Tampa is such a lovely place to live. So it's a win-win."

CAREER PATH INCLUDES RESEARCH WORK AT NCI

Dr. Chung's studious nature has always kept her focused and determined.

Although she enjoyed and excelled at playing the piano, her strongest suits in school were science and math — both of which did not require polished language skills.

"That's what always made the most sense to me," she says. "I knew I would follow some type of career path in this area; I just wasn't sure exactly what."

She opted to stay close to home for her undergraduate studies, majoring in biochemistry at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Once she had her degree, she knew it was time to leave the comfort zone of her adopted city, which was heavily populated by Korean immigrants.

"I didn't move halfway across the world to be a part of the same community I had left behind. I wanted to assimilate," she says. She especially wanted to improve her spoken English skills. So Dr. Chung accepted a job as a research assistant at the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland. In her new environment, she made it a point to socialize with non-Asians.



“It matters to me to be a great doctor, so I wanted to zero in on where I could be the most help and challenge myself.”

“In an effort to meet more non-Koreans to practice English, I met a Dutchman and ended up with a Dutch boyfriend,” she says with a smile. “He was instrumental in helping me to bridge any communication and cultural gaps I had.”

She and Robbert Slebos, Ph.D., of Amsterdam, eventually married and had two children. Maryke, 18, a recent graduate of the Friends School of Baltimore, is looking at several prospective colleges, including the University of Tampa. Son Ricky, 15, attends Tampa Preparatory School. Dr. Chung’s husband of 21 years also relocated here to accept a position as a staff scientist in the lab of Eric Haura, M.D., where he will conduct lung cancer research using proteomics technology.

INTRIGUED BY AN ESPECIALLY CHALLENGING DISEASE

Dr. Chung’s road to Moffitt has been an impressive one, with multiple degrees, fellowships, teaching positions and research projects. She earned her master’s in interdisciplinary science studies with a focus in molecular biology at Johns Hopkins University and her medical degree at Eastern Virginia Medical School. She completed her residency and fellowship in internal medicine and medical oncology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Her schooling and training have also taken her to the Vanderbilt University in Nashville and Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

It was in the last year of her fellowship in Chapel Hill that Dr. Chung began focusing on head and neck cancers, which include cancers arising from the skull base down to the larynx (voice box). True to form, she was drawn to a very challenging area of oncology.

“These cancers are difficult to treat, starting with the location,” she says. “You’re dealing with parts of the body that are so visible and functionally crucial such as eyes, ears, nose, mouth and voice box,” Dr. Chung says. “All of it intrigued me. In this specialty, there is no room for error, or a person could be severely disfigured or have difficulty performing very basic functions in life.

“It matters to me to be a great doctor, so I wanted to zero in on where I could be the most help and challenge myself.”

There is also a stigma attached to several of these cancers because many are triggered by tobacco or alcohol abuse, or HPV (human papillomavirus, a common sexually transmitted infection in the United States). She says some 40,000 to 45,000 new cases of these cancers combined are diagnosed every year.

“The attitude toward these patients sometimes is, ‘Well, you caused this. It’s your own fault.’ I don’t look at it that way at all,” she says. “When patients come through my door, I do not judge. That’s something I learned as an immigrant.”

And some of her patients are unable to speak because they’ve had their voice boxes or tongues removed. Again, Dr. Chung relates to the silence. It brings back memories of her early years in America, when she struggled with learning a new language and spent more time listening than talking. She empathizes with those who have no voice, because she once felt that way, too.

She also can identify with the feeling of not being recognized on one’s own merits.

As a female physician in a male-dominated field, she can relate to having been routinely dismissed. She recounts a typical past occurrence. “I come into the room to meet the patient, and go through what needs to be done. They politely nod and then they ask when the doctor will be there.”

She can laugh about that today, but she becomes serious when discussing the importance of research and patient care.

FINDING THE SAFEST, YET MOST EFFECTIVE TREATMENTS

Dr. Chung currently has two specialty areas of head and neck cancer research that involve HPV-associated cancer and tobacco-related cancer.

HPV-positive head and neck cancer patients get a good prognosis and have a high chance of cure, but the treatment is “very toxic,” she says. She is trying to identify personalized therapy that would decrease the toxicity of the treatment. “We want to find out the least intense treatment with the least amount of toxicity and that effectively will cure the patient,” she says.

She’s also involved in a research project for HPV-negative head and neck cancer patients, where the patients typically have a poor prognosis and the cure rate is “terrible.” Many of these patients have tobacco-induced cancers. She wants to safely intensify the treatment and, ultimately, improve survival.

PERSONAL TOUCH HELPS GENERATE OPTIMISM

David Lee, 57, feels he’s in the “best hands possible” with Dr. Chung.

Last fall, the Plant City man went in for a routine exam of his carotid artery. Tests revealed something ominous: a mass in his neck. After a biopsy, he was diagnosed with stage 4 tonsil cancer with metastasis to his neck lymph nodes.



Dr. Chung had just arrived at Moffitt. She explained in layman's language his options for treatment and what he could expect. She listened to his concerns and patiently answered all his questions.

And, Lee relates, she did something unexpected: She called to check on him during her off hours and let him know she was available any time he needed her.

"I've had about as good a cancer experience that you could hope for," says Lee, who completed his chemotherapy in December. "It's not over yet, but I feel good. I feel like I'm going to beat this. And knowing Dr. Chung is in charge gives me a lot of optimism."

AIM: TO DEVELOP THE BEST HEAD AND NECK CANCER CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

She has grand plans for the department she now chairs.

Dr. Chung is adding new surgeons, medical oncologists and endocrinologists specializing in head and neck and endocrine cancers to her staff in order to bring new talent and expertise to the clinical and research mission. She is also planning to seek a SPORE grant from the National Cancer Institute in the near future. SPORE (Specialized Programs of Research Excellence) grant projects promote interdisciplinary research and move scientific research findings to the clinical setting. These grants are not easy to obtain. Moffitt currently holds a SPORE grant for melanoma research and is the only Florida recipient of SPORE funding.

Where does she see the department in five years?

"The very best in the country," she says emphatically. And then Dr. Chung corrects herself.

"The best in the world. I want my department to be the best head and neck cancer center of excellence in the world. And it's entirely possible."

After all, a daughter doesn't forget her mother's words. 🗣️

"The best in the world. I want my department to be the best head and neck cancer center of excellence in the world. And it's entirely possible."