

# MOFFITT MOMENTUM<sup>®</sup>

Volume 8, Issue 2

## BREAKING BARRIERS

Construction nurtures  
diverse partnerships

## BEYOND PRECISION

Research eases  
cancer burden

## HOPE AND VISION

Teacher perseveres  
through treatment



# Leadership Message



Patrick Hwu, MD  
President and CEO

Dear Friends,

We are happy to share this issue of Momentum magazine, featuring portraits of hope, expansion, innovation and triumph.

You will meet Drs. Tiffany Carson and Jessica Islam from the Division of Community Outreach, Engagement and Equity. Their research interests focus on reducing racial disparities in cancer and better outcomes through cancer prevention initiatives. Dr. Carson describes her intervention research on lifestyle factors, such as diet, stress and physical activity, that can lower obesity-associated diseases, particularly in ethnic minorities. Dr. Islam's journey in health disparities research began in her father's home country of Bangladesh. Now her aim is to bridge the gap in which minority populations often are underrepresented in clinical trials and research studies.

Jarryd Reid tells his story of courage and determination as he undergoes chemotherapy to fight a blood disease rarely diagnosed in young people of his age. He describes why he continued to work at a Tampa middle school while undergoing treatment. His primary purpose: to be a guide and an encourager to the young people in his community. At times it was necessary to teach virtually while receiving infusions, but he persevered to assure his students he was there for them.

The arrival of two donated UV robots, named Tom and Jean, brought some cheer and ease to the serious business

of keeping patient rooms sterilized. When the supplier's mother was afraid to come to Moffitt at the onset of the COVID pandemic, the supplier made it her personal mission to see that Moffitt got this state-of-the-art equipment. The robots use ultraviolet light to disinfect surfaces and are named after the supplier's parents, both of whom were treated at Moffitt.

Our own Dr. Kristen Otto shares a poignant account of her young daughter Cassidy's battle with cancer, the family's courage and resilience and how her Moffitt family provided support throughout the difficult journey. Through a 5K race, the dedication of a special garden and more, Cassidy's wish to be remembered was granted.

Many of you are watching the new surgical hospital construction across from the McKinley campus and sharing our excitement throughout the process. But did you know the expansion hospital is breaking barriers when it comes to diversity? The project committed to allocating contracts to minority-owned vendors and also is using this as an opportunity to mentor minority-owned businesses.

We hope you enjoy reading these and other stories in this issue, which emphasize Moffitt's ongoing commitment to our patients and the community by contributing to the prevention and cure of cancer through scientific research, innovative patient care and more.

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**ON THE COVER:**

Jonathan Graham, Horus Construction Services (left), and Fred Hames, Barr & Barr Inc., reflect Moffitt Cancer Center's dedication to supplier diversity.



**Faith and Fitness**  
Star athlete refuses to worry



**Early Detection**  
New faculty dig deeper into disparities



**A Positive Remembrance**  
Run helps celebrate a child's life

# MOFFITT COMMITS \$52 Million for Supplier Diversity

*Expansion hospital construction brings experience, mentorship and jobs to minority-, women-, LGBTQ-, disabled veteran- and Black-owned firms*

By Sara Bondell

Photos by Kevin Kirby



*Jonathan Graham, Horus Construction Services (left), and Shaun Womack, who opened Versa-Tile & Marble in 2004, are among the minority business owners involved in the new inpatient surgical hospital construction project.*

**AFTER SPENDING HIS TEEN AND EARLY ADULT YEARS IN AND OUT OF TROUBLE, SHAUN WOMACK DECIDED IT WAS A TIME FOR CHANGE.**

Trying to help, his father-in-law gave him a job laying tile, and despite the long hours and hard work, he started to actually like it.

In 2004, Womack opened Versa-Tile & Marble, working with an architect in the Florida Panhandle on high-end homes. The company eventually crossed over into commercial work and relocated to the Tampa Bay area. Working with up to 20 laborers in the field at a time, Womack was doing good work, but as a small minority-owned business he struggled to land large construction jobs.

“The biggest problem is being noticed, meeting insurance requirements and financing a large job,” said Womack. “They don’t know us, but we know if companies give us a chance they would still be doing business with us to this day.”

Now Womack is working on his biggest project to date: Moffitt Cancer Center’s new, \$400 million inpatient surgical hospital. Moffitt has committed to a supplier diversity goal of 15% over the span of this project, about \$52 million. The project will most likely exceed projections; as of July 2021, almost \$32 million has been spent on diverse contracts.

Nearly \$10 million in contracts have been awarded to veteran-owned businesses, while more than \$9 million has been awarded to women-owned vendors and more than \$5 million to Black-owned businesses.

“Moffitt’s commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion ensures that diverse businesses have an opportunity to participate and compete for our procurement opportunities,” said Moffitt Supplier Diversity Manager Desiree Hanson. “As a result, we are creating an economic impact in the communities we serve.”

The cancer center ensures that all businesses, including diverse ones, have a chance to participate in bid opportunities by conducting vendor outreach events to engage and register new vendors and providing the technical assistance needed to teach those businesses how to work with Moffitt.

“We are a leader in supplier diversity, not just cancer care,” said Hanson.

***“Moffitt’s commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion ensures that diverse businesses have an opportunity to participate and compete for our procurement opportunities.”***

*“We are a leader in supplier diversity, not just cancer care.”*

**MORE THAN ‘CHECKING A BOX’**

The new Moffitt expansion hospital, expected to open in 2023, sits across from the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation Outpatient Center on McKinley Drive. The scale of the construction project makes this Moffitt’s largest project to date as it relates to supplier diversity and the inclusion of diverse vendors.

Moffitt’s dedication to supplier diversity goes back decades. The program focuses on inclusion of diverse businesses in all procurement processes and is dedicated to the development, growth and utilization of minority, women, veteran and service disabled veteran-owned business enterprises. The center recently updated its diversity categories to also include LGBTQ and disability-owned businesses.

To meet its diversity goals, Moffitt teamed up with two Tampa-based firms: Barr & Barr Inc., a 94-year-old general contractor, and Black-owned Horus Construction Services Inc.

When Fred Hames, director of operations for Barr & Barr, moved from Atlanta to Tampa in 1998, he saw the need for

increased supplier diversity in the area. He could have easily started using the same minority-owned businesses he worked with in Atlanta, but how would that benefit his new community?

“As a large general contractor, there’s a certain level of obligation that we have for diversity, and someone’s got to start it,” said Hames. “Someone’s got to take the leap, because when everybody sees the impact then it will catch and gain momentum.”

Hames took that leap by building a relationship with Jonathan Graham, who was working as a subcontractor at the time. When Hames won the bid for the Tampa Museum of Art, he noticed there was no diversity requirement and approached Graham with the idea to partner on the project. He suggested that Graham open his own construction management business to help with supplier diversity. From there, Graham’s Horus Construction Services was born.

“Diversity is about leadership and what leaders really want in their corporate mentality and their heart,” said Graham. “I have learned that 5% of the people in this world are leaders and 95% are followers that will do what they’re pushed to do. So, if the leaders say they understand diversity, others can look at them for guidance.”

The City of Tampa embraced what Hames and Graham were trying to accomplish, and a few years later the pair began working on projects at Moffitt.

“When you look at what we were doing at Moffitt and the level of complexity in the risk of a bone marrow transplant unit and vertical expansions and horizontal

*“As a large general contractor, there’s a certain level of obligation that we have for diversity, and someone’s got to start it.”*

*Left to right: Jonathan Graham and Shaun Womack; working on the new hospital is Womack’s largest project to date.*

expansions, all that stuff we were doing intimidates small diversity firms,” said Hames. “They don’t want to do it because of the risk associated with it.”

Working together, Barr & Barr, Horus and Moffitt found ways to attract smaller businesses to the cancer center’s projects. It starts with community outreach events, then a review team scores project bids on diversity. Once a business is awarded a project, the group continues to educate and mentor the team throughout the entire project, and the construction companies assume small businesses’ insurance and risk liabilities.

“We could just check a box and hire someone because they’re Black or a woman or Latino/Hispanic and say, ‘OK, I guess we checked that box,’” said Graham. “But the leadership here is not like that. We are not only saying we are giving you the job opportunity, but we are going to go over the fine points, take the time necessary to make sure you are successful.”

**CREATING OPPORTUNITIES**

Shaun Womack’s crew is doing all the hard tile for the project, which includes bathrooms and the first-floor café. And thanks to the Barr & Barr/Horus Mentor Protégé Program, he and his team will be learning many more skills along the way.

“Shaun has been in the business for a very long time and his quality of work is very good,” said Graham. “Normally, he wouldn’t have had this opportunity, but we wanted him to work on the project because he is going to be an asset.”

Graham has given Womack an office right next to his on the site so he can monitor the work and help Womack grow. As the managing partner, Barr & Barr steps up to bond the entire project so the smaller companies don’t have to. Laborers are also given invaluable education, such as infectious control and lifesaving training – all skills they can take to other job sites in the future.

“This is a sign of stability for my workers,” said Womack. “Construction is really up and down, but to build a project



*“My goal is to hold tight to these relationships.”*

like this for a long period of time gives you a chance to gain momentum and we are going to be teaching them so much.”

“My goal is to hold tight to these relationships,” he added. “I am going to do everything I can on my part not to mess up and perform to the highest level.”

Doing good work on this project also makes Barr & Barr more likely to hire the company again for future projects and opens the door for other jobs.

“Projects like this create opportunities for these businesses to grow, gain health care experience and build capacity,” said Hanson. “They have now worked on a \$400 million health care



*Jonathan Graham (left) with Fred Hames, Barr & Barr Inc. Hames previously had built a relationship with Graham, encouraging him to open his own construction company, Horus Construction Services Inc.*



project and can reflect their participation in resume as they pursue future bid opportunities.”

“A good diversity program does not cost the project any more money. It saves the project money because it brings participation and subcontractors to the table that traditionally would not be there,” Hames added. “Now is it harder? It’s a lot harder because you have to sit with those firms, explain to them what’s going on, but is it worth it? It’s so worth it.”

No business owner nor worker is left on their own throughout the project. There are monthly supplier diversity meetings with the entire construction team to make sure things are running smoothly and to troubleshoot any problems.

“Whenever I visit the new hospital and see the workers, I quickly notice the pride on their faces,” said Hanson. “As you look around the job site you see diversity at work. Large and small businesses, workers from all cultures and backgrounds working together and sharing in our mission.”

***“This is not just talk or a label. Moffitt is really trying to help out.”***

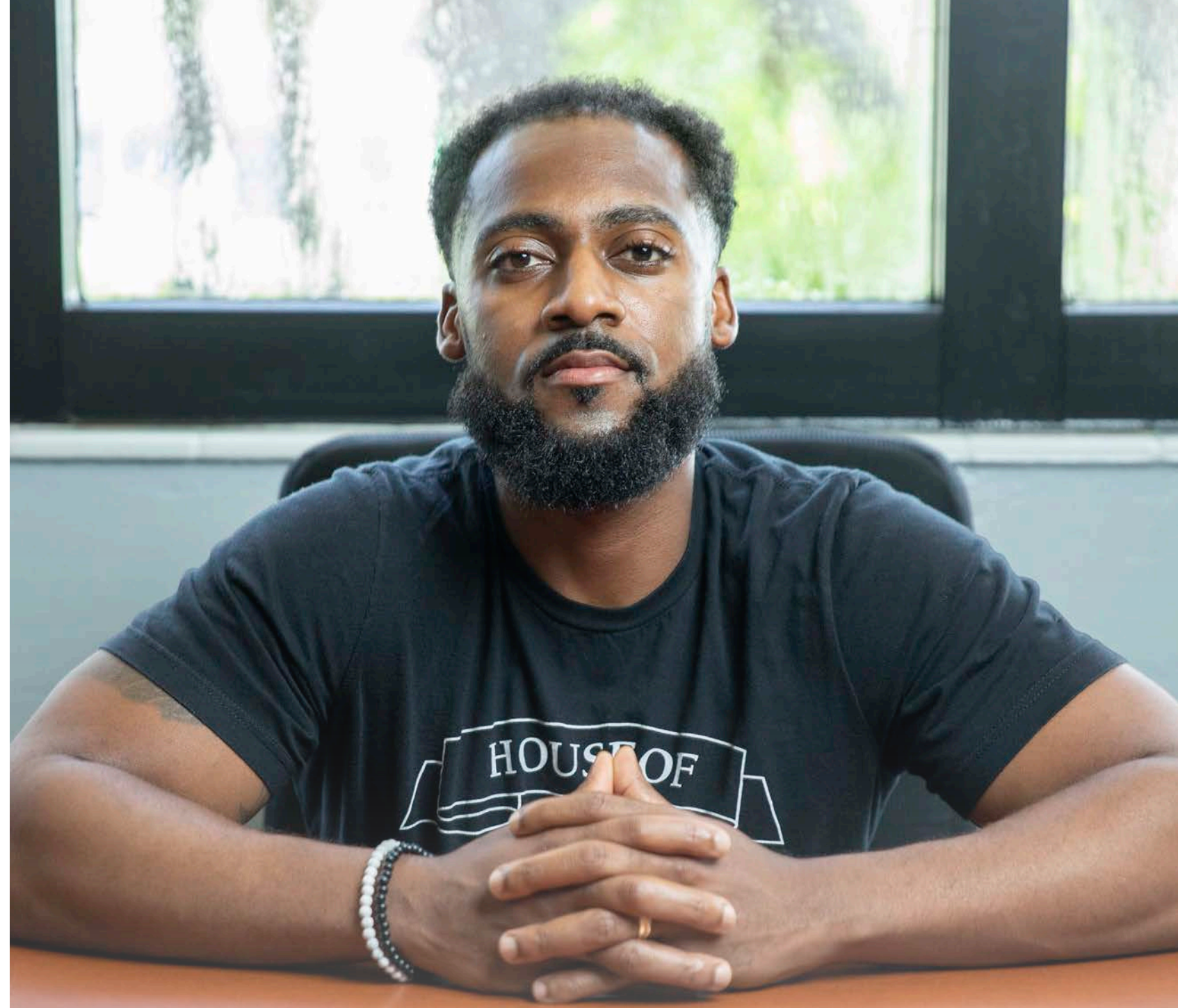
#### ‘THIS IS NOT JUST TALK’

The entire Mentor Protégé Program has been so inspiring to Womack that he has started his own nonprofit program that teaches at-risk boys a trade.

“For them to see me and how far I have come and know all you have to do is work hard,” said Womack. “Someone may only have a sixth-grade education, but they are good with their hands and they’re leaders, that’s all it takes.”

Womack loves telling the kids about his newest project and how he is laying all the hard tile for a 10-story, \$400 million hospital. About how his past does not dictate his present. And about how supplier diversity efforts can impact thousands of workers and the local community.

“This is not just talk or a label,” said Womack. “Moffitt is really trying to help out.”



## *Stepping Up* TO THE PLATE

At 30, star athlete Jarryd Reid was diagnosed with a rare blood cancer. Being fit just may have saved his life.

By Sara Bondell

Photos by Nicholas Gould



Jarryd Reid was 6 years old when his dad came home with a baseball glove.

**His older sister was in Girl Scouts, and it was time for Reid to find a hobby. He joined the sport much later than most of his teammates who had already played T-ball, and it showed.**

“I was one of the worst players in the whole park for a long time,” said Reid. He batted at the bottom of the order, and one time a centerfield coach caught a fly ball right above him, thinking Reid couldn’t catch it.

But what skills Reid lacked, he made up with attitude. “I always got commended by a lot of my coaches for giving the most effort and just always hustling.”

Reid attributes his drive to his parents’ journey to have children. His mother suffered back-to-back full-term miscarriages, followed by a stillborn birth before giving birth to Reid and his sister.

“The [other babies] didn’t have the opportunity I did so I am going to do the best I can since they never got a chance,” said Reid.

With that effort, Reid became captain of his high school baseball team, was recruited to play at Florida A&M University and began dreaming of a professional career. He was an elite athlete – the very picture of good health – and focused on working out and eating right.

But in the spring of 2020, he ran into his toughest challenge yet: a rare type of non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Looking back on the diagnosis, Reid told one of his teammates that all the work and training had been worth it.

“Being this fit saved my life,” he said.

## RARE DIAGNOSIS

Reid had big goals for 2020. He was coaching a flag football team and hitting the weight room hard to get back up to his college weight. He had turned down pro baseball opportunities to follow in his dad’s footsteps to become an educator, and was halfway through another school year as the student success coach at Sligh Middle Magnet School, mentoring students with attendance, behavioral or curriculum problems.

“Jarryd is a people person and a magnet for the kids,” said Sligh Middle Magnet School Principal Anthony Jones. “Oftentimes, our students – for a lot of different reasons – don’t get that level of intensity at home, so to have somebody here to keep them accountable, stay with them, believe in them and care about them, it’s impossible to overstate the significance of his role.”

Things were going well at home, too. Reid had married his high school sweetheart, Aramis, and they were raising their 18-month-old daughter, Jaxin.

In February, Jarryd began having back pain. He assumed he injured it working out, but weeks later he was still in pain and his appetite decreased. He started having night sweats and feared he might have COVID-19.

In April, his wife and mother urged him to go to the emergency room for blood work and a CT scan. The results showed stage 4 mantle cell lymphoma, a rare type of non-Hodgkin lymphoma that affects the lymphatic system.

The median age for mantle cell lymphoma is 60 to 70 and primarily affects white men. Jarryd is a 31-year-old Black man. A doctor would later tell him he was the youngest mantle cell lymphoma patient he had ever treated in his 25-year career.

“It kind of made me think I might have been misdiagnosed. I felt like an anomaly,” said Jarryd. “My immediate concern is man, now I have to tell my wife and my parents.”

Because of COVID-19 protocols, Jarryd was alone in the emergency room and had to deliver the news to Aramis over the phone.

“My heart stopped,” she said. “I was just in disbelief. I thought the worst. To me, cancer means death.”

Not so for Jarryd. With his strong baseball mentality and deep faith, he believed God had specifically chosen him for this fight and refused to back down. “I don’t believe in worrying,” he said. “I was ready for whatever. I knew I was going to have

to suffer, so I was just stepping up to the plate. Whatever I have to go through, let’s do it, so we can beat this.”

## LEADING THE TEAM

Three days after his diagnosis, Jarryd began his first round of inpatient chemotherapy at a community hospital. Because of the pandemic, he was hospitalized alone for three weeks, and when he returned home his family witnessed the immediate effects of the treatment.

“To me, he didn’t even look like himself,” Aramis said. “His face was so sunken in from all the weight he had lost. I just thought he was so fragile, like he was going to break.”

*“Whatever I have to go through, let’s do it, so we can beat this.”*

The chemotherapy had severely weakened Jarryd’s immune system, which made him extremely vulnerable to COVID-19. To protect himself, he quarantined on the second floor of his home in between treatment cycles. Daughter Jaxin would come to the foot of the stairs and call up to him.

“That was the worst part, hearing my daughter at the bottom of the stairs,” Jarryd said. “I really take pride in being a father and a husband and to have to hear my child downstairs ask about me for weeks and I can’t embrace my kid. Man, that really killed me.”

After two chemotherapy cycles, Jarryd transferred his care to Moffitt Cancer Center. He tolerated the majority of his treatment very well, only experiencing a few complications.

“My whole life I have been fit and self-sufficient, so I never thought I would need people to literally push me in a wheelchair because I might get fatigued from walking the stairs.”

Aramis recalls one doctor’s appointment where her husband was vomiting in the car and in the lobby. “The color of his skin changed and I had never seen him so weak,” she said. “When he actually allowed us to roll him in a wheelchair, I knew something was wrong. I thought this is where it’s going to get really, really bad. I thought OK, I am going to have to be a mom and a dad and I am scared.”

Despite his wife’s fears, Jarryd learned that day that he was in remission just halfway through treatment. But because his disease was so aggressive, his best chance for a cure was a stem cell transplant.



*“Being this fit saved my life.”*



*“I really take pride in being a father and a husband and to have to hear my child downstairs ask about me for weeks and I can’t embrace my kid. Man, that really killed me.”*



Jarryd Reid enjoys family time with his daughter, Jaxin, and his wife, Aramis.

In September, after six months of chemotherapy, Jarryd underwent an autologous stem cell transplant. Unlike an allogenic transplant that uses a donor’s stem cells, Jarryd’s stem cells were removed and transfused back into him after an intense round of chemotherapy.

“In this case, we determined that an autologous transplant was better because the chance for cure between an autologous and allogenic transplant were the same,” said Dr. Michael Nieder, senior member of the Blood and Marrow Transplant and Cellular Immunotherapy Department. “And we also know that the complication rate is less.”

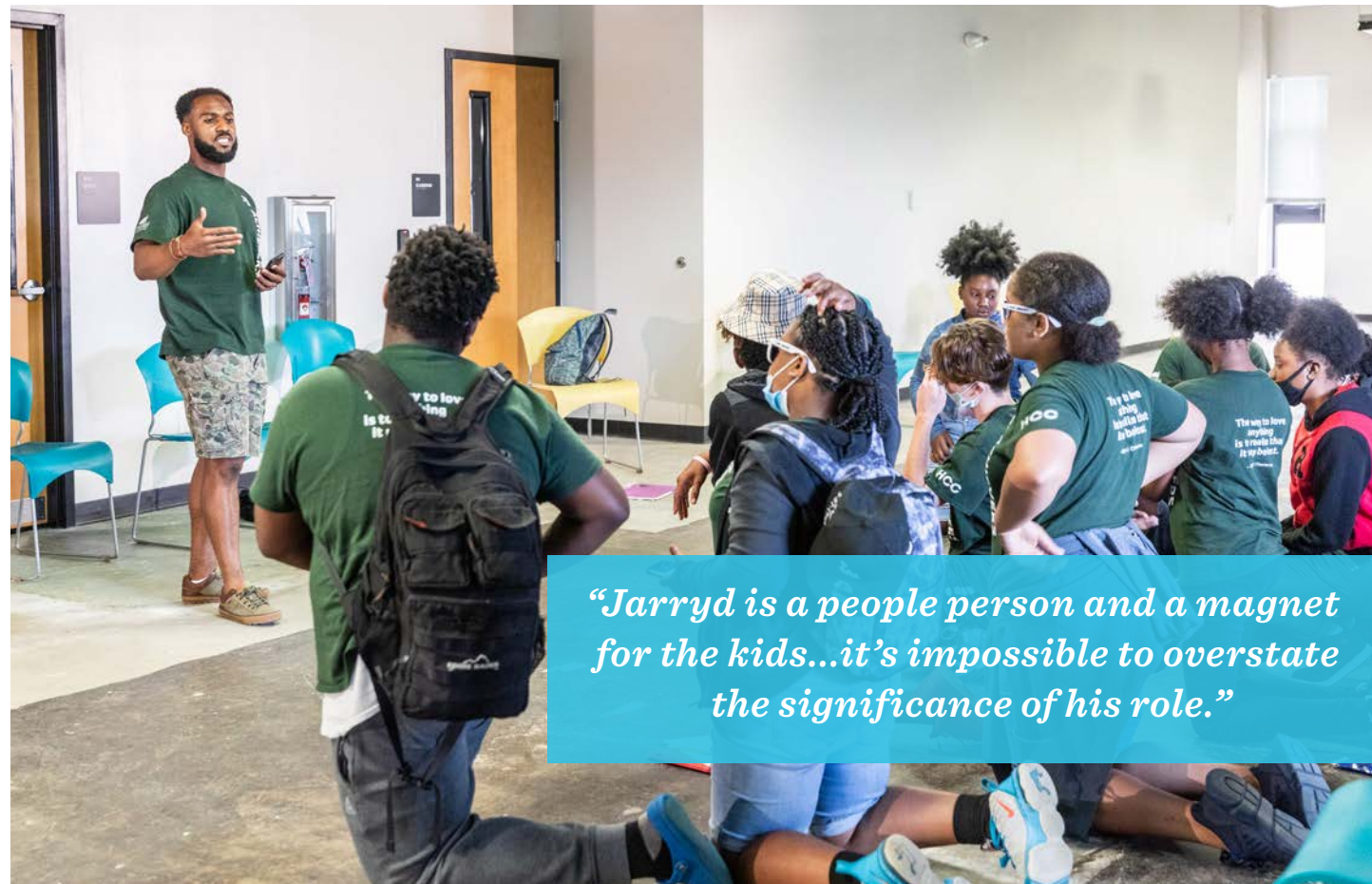
**SHOWING UP**

Jarryd was hospitalized for another month during his transplant, but as with the other legs of his treatment, he

continued to work. School had shifted to virtual learning during the pandemic, making it easier for him to teach from anywhere. During his eight months of treatment, he only missed five days of school.

“I am a workhorse. I love work,” Jarryd said. “I feel like I add value to the people that I am serving and I feel like the team needs me, so I’m going to make myself available to the team.”

In this case, his team was his students. Many of them rely on Reid to be the strong, constant male figure in their lives. Jarryd didn’t hide anything from them, always turning his camera on and occasionally having to pause lessons for a nurse to come into the room. The students watched as their once muscular teacher with dreadlocks dropped 30 pounds and lost his hair and his eyebrows. But it turned out to be one of the most valuable lessons he could teach.



*“Jarryd is a people person and a magnet for the kids...it’s impossible to overstate the significance of his role.”*

Jarryd Reid began the 2021-2022 school year at Sligh Middle Magnet School and had returned to teaching in person at a YMCA summer school.

“Sometimes these kids literally are in situations they don’t ask to be in, and for me, it was always hard to relate,” Jarryd said. “But now I can completely relate. In spite of the fact that this is something I can’t control, I am still showing them you can give effort where you can. I am here giving you my best, so you all should do the same.”

No one – not his family, his doctors or his school – was surprised Jarryd kept teaching. Especially his wife.

“If he could sit up, he was going to show up,” Aramis said.

*“If he could sit up, he was going to show up.”*

“That level of commitment and attention to detail and faithfulness, that was motivating to me,” said Jones, the Sligh Middle Magnet School principal. “For him to do what he did in the midst of what he was going through personally and physically was unbelievably inspiring.”

With all he was going through, Jarryd also kept up as best he could with his physical fitness during treatment. While he couldn’t train at the level he was used to, he walked daily and performed body weight exercises as much as possible.

“His physical fitness is outstanding,” said Nieder. “In all types of cancer treatment, those people who are fit have much better survival than those who are very, very frail. So, it played a significant role in his long-term survival and also in decreasing the complications from transplant.”

**‘FIGHT TO BEAT ME’**

On Oct. 19, 2020, Jarryd celebrated his “new” birthday – the day his body started producing stem cells at a level where he can continue living a normal life.

“It was a pretty big deal,” Aramis said. “I felt a sense of relief, that I am not going to be alone, that I don’t have to explain anything hard to Jaxin.”

This summer, Jarryd returned to teaching in person at a YMCA summer school and began the 2021-2022 school year back at Sligh Middle Magnet School. He brought his new perspective on life with him.

“I am slower to anger because there are a lot more things to be grateful for,” Jarryd said. “If you have hope, that’s the most important thing to be able to keep driving you forward because when your mind goes, your body goes rapidly.”



*“In all types of cancer treatment, those people who are fit have much better survival than those who are very, very frail. So, it played a significant role in his long-term survival and also in decreasing the complications from transplant.”*

– Dr. Michael Nieder

At home, he is once again enjoying being the husband and dad he was before his diagnosis.

“I can honestly say I am not really afraid of anything anymore,” said Aramis. “To watch his strength and faith and really see first-hand how your own fear can get in the way of moving through something successfully. I think I owe him a thank you for letting me be in the passenger seat and watching everything he’s done and how he did it.”

Jarryd will continue getting an immunotherapy infusion every two months for three years. His prognosis is good, but he knows if any other challenges are thrown his way he will handle them the same way: stepping up to the plate and swinging for the fences.

“You have to have this relentless mentality that even if I struck out last at bat, I still think I will hit a home run this time,” he said. “You are going to have to really, really, really fight to beat me.”



*“I can honestly say I am not really afraid of anything anymore.”*





# Practicing Precision Prevention

Moffitt researchers Jessica Islam and Tiffany Carson are working on finding new cancer prevention methods for diverse populations

By Sara Bondell

Photos by Nicholas Gould

At Moffitt Cancer Center, the mission is simple: to contribute to the prevention and cure of cancer. Many read that statement and focus on cure – the research to discover new life-saving treatments. But prevention is also heavily steeped in Moffitt’s core, and the cancer center has embraced the growing field of cancer prevention research.

“The field focuses on identifying ways to prevent cancer from happening and to detect cancers early so they are more readily responsive to treatments or surgeries, which can translate into decreased morbidity or mortality,” said Peter Kanetsky, PhD, department chair of Cancer Epidemiology. “We can also think about prevention of unwanted long-term outcomes or adverse short-term outcomes involving therapies for cancer.”

In addition to studying ways things like diet and obesity affect cancer risk, prevention researchers also practice precision prevention. Just as precision medicine involves finding the most individualized treatment for a patient, precision prevention identifies which individual is more likely to respond to a certain therapy, such as immunotherapy. If researchers can target which treatments will be successful for certain patients in advance, they can prevent them from experiencing adverse side effects or wasting time undergoing treatments that don’t work.

Cancer prevention research is a requirement for all comprehensive cancer centers, and Moffitt has worked over the last two decades to create robust programs that focus on

*“The field focuses on identifying ways to prevent cancer from happening and to detect cancers early...”*

cancer prevention and control. That includes recruiting some of the best and brightest, who not only focus on prevention and wellness research, but also want to dig deeper into health disparities.

“With any research program it is important to seek out and hire the top-ranking individuals of the next generation of researchers,” said Kanetsky.

Two of the new cancer epidemiology research recruits, Jessica Islam, PhD, MPH, and Tiffany Carson, PhD, MPH, have already hit the ground running at Moffitt.

## PERSONAL MISSION

For Jessica Islam, her passion for describing racial and ethnic disparities is rooted in her upbringing. Her mother is from Ecuador and her father is from Bangladesh.

“It’s a personal mission to focus on diverse and minoritized communities in the United States to be able to speak to the disadvantages they experience when accessing care, specifically in the context of cancer,” said Islam.

It is common for minority populations to be underrepresented in clinical trials and research studies, and Islam wants to bridge that gap. “As an epidemiologist one of the important aspects of my research is to be able to do the work, to be able to describe these differences acknowledging small sample sizes to move the research agenda forward,” she said. “I frequently receive feedback that the numbers are too small to focus on X or Y population, but if we continue to use this framework, academics like myself will consistently face roadblocks towards their ultimate career goals. Even if the numbers are small, let’s still publish it; maybe someone in the future can conduct a meta-analysis on the topic.”

Islam’s health disparities research began in her father’s home country of Bangladesh in 2012, where she participated in the first population-based study looking at the burden and risk factors of human papillomavirus (HPV) and cervical cancer. Results gave her the first glimpse into the importance of prevention methods in areas where there are few treatment resources once cervical cancer is detected at later stages. “Prevention is very important because if we can prevent the cancer before it starts or fully develops or even identify cancer at early stages, we are not only alleviating the burden associated with invasive treatment the patient will face, but we are also alleviating the burden to the health care system and improving the cost effectiveness of our efforts as a whole,” said Islam.

Now at Moffitt, Islam is focusing on leveraging large existing registry studies for the state of Florida, including the Florida Cancer Registry and University of Florida’s OneFlorida Data Trust. She is interested in addressing the disproportionate burden of cancer among people living with HIV in the state through characterizing cancer screening uptake and determinants.

“Florida is an important place to do this work given the high burden in the state; in fact, three of the 10 U.S. cities with the highest incidence of HIV are in the state of Florida,” said Islam.

Using the Florida Cancer Registry, Islam aims to estimate the burden of HPV-associated cervical cancer by county and other geographic metrics, specifically after correction for hysterectomy. This is important because racial/ethnic minority women are more likely to undergo hysterectomy, so the true disparities experienced by minoritized communities in the state of Florida will be described. Islam’s study will address these gaps.

*“It’s a personal mission to focus on diverse and minoritized communities in the United States...”*

*–Dr. Jessica Islam*



Islam also plans to continue her work in cervical cancer prevention in collaboration with Anna Giuliano, PhD, specifically through her large project looking at cervical cancer prevention among women living with HIV in three different Latin American countries.

“It is important to me that we can identify and prevent an infection at an early stage,” said Islam, “to be able to prevent this long-standing morbidity that comes with many consequences that have a high mortality rate, such as cervical cancer.”

Islam’s other areas of research also include disparities in access to palliative care and treatment, implementation science of cancer screening programs, cancer survivorship during the COVID-19 pandemic and outcomes among adults living with chronic conditions who endorse cannabis use.

*“In many cases, it’s much easier to prevent things from happening than to think of how to treat something once it happens.”*

#### DECODING THE GUT MICROBIOME

Tiffany Carson found her sweet spot between epidemiology and behavioral sciences. During her postdoctoral training, she became interested in interventions on lifestyle factors, such as diet, stress and physical activity, that can lower obesity-associated diseases, particularly in ethnic minorities in the U.S.

When she was training at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, she helped develop a research program that found ways to modify behavioral weight loss interventions that are culturally appropriate for diverse populations. Carson is focused on the impact of dietary patterns on the gut microbiome, which has been linked to both risk for obesity and multiple cancers, specifically in the colorectal cancer space.

“When I started to learn more about the opportunity to bring my research program to Moffitt I was particularly excited because I know that there’s a lot of interest and energy in growing this area of focus here and building teams to think about how diet and weight management are important parts of the wellness spectrum and how these behaviors can be related to cancer prevention,” said Carson.

While there has been a decent amount of gut microbiome research in the larger medical community, more needs to be done to understand its role in cancer development, especially when it comes to understanding racial differences that may contribute to disparities and obesity.

“In my mind, the next step is thinking about how we can attempt to manipulate or modify the gut microbiome to make a more health-promoting environment and lower risk for chronic diseases and poor outcomes,” said Carson.

Carson recently received funding from the National Cancer Institute to conduct a study to look at the impact of different dietary patterns across different racial groups of men and women, targeting different bacterial groups that we know are associated with colorectal cancer.

She hopes her research can help shed some light on the importance of identifying cultural differences when making health care recommendations, especially when it comes to dictating behavioral changes like diet and exercise. “We can’t

make guidelines based off some prototype that may not be generalized or applicable to the entire population,” she said. “We have to consider culture, environment, resources and beliefs.”

#### ‘AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION IS WORTH A POUND OF CURE’

Both Carson and Islam are thankful their studies not only have institutional buy-in, but also a framework in place that is already working to tackle health disparities, such as the newly established Office of Community Outreach, Engagement and Equity.

*“We have to consider culture, environment, resources and beliefs.”*

*–Dr. Tiffany Carson*



“All cancer centers are required to include community outreach and engagement in their research agenda, but some take it more seriously than others,” said Islam. “And the dedication Moffitt has shown through different initiatives and just the supportive words I have already heard from leadership, the future is looking pretty bright in my opinion.”

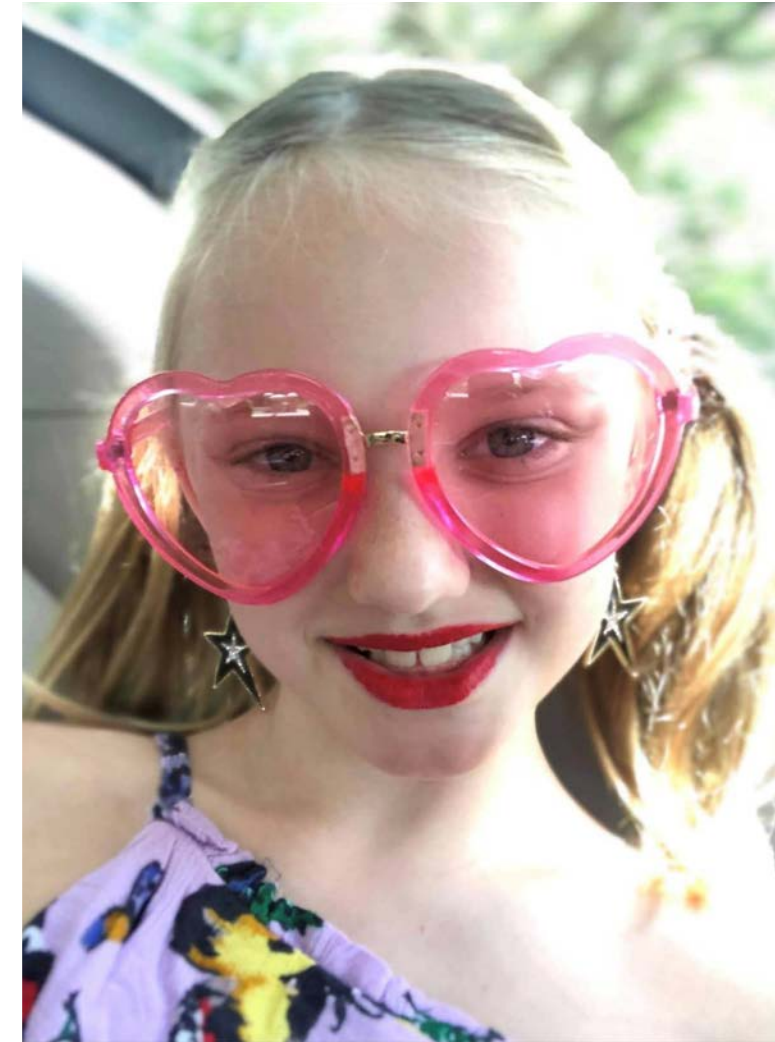
“There is an old public health quote that says an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” said Carson. “In many cases, it’s much easier to prevent things from happening than to think of how to treat something once it happens. The difficulty with that is it’s hard to get people to think of how day-to-day decisions contribute to risk level and to convince people that prevention work is as important, if not more important, than the treatment work.”

But with increased funding and Moffitt’s dedication to this important research, these young investigators are hoping to be part of a paradigm shift that ultimately reduces the cancer burden in the U.S.

# REMEMBERING Cassidy Otto

By Pat Carragher

Photos courtesy of Dr. Kristen Otto and family



## Cassidy Otto was an artist, comedian, dancer and ice skater.

Her mother, Kristen Otto, is a surgeon in Moffitt Cancer Center's Head and Neck Program. She described "Cass" as a normal, happy and intelligent third grader with a love for animals, food, gardening and jiu-jitsu. She liked avocados, watermelon, edamame, cookies and gelato. She ran 5K races and was a fashion aficionado who visited nine countries.



Dr. Kristen Otto

In September 2019 at just 8 years old, what seemed like a common migraine was anything but for Cassidy.

"She had been having some migraine headaches every couple of weeks," said Otto. "We took her to the pediatrician, and they thought that it was probably just a migraine but suggested getting a baseline MRI and seeing

a pediatric neurologist just to be safe. I dealt with migraines as a kid, so I thought I knew exactly what she was facing."

Otto was in clinic the day Cassidy had her scans. Her husband, Casey, texted her with a message to call him as soon as possible.

"He told me the MRI technician came bursting in the room because she clearly saw something bad on the scan. They told him to go straight to the emergency room. At the same time, the neurologist is calling me saying it's a tumor. It's bad. She's got pressure on her brain."

The Ottos met with a neurosurgeon at St. Joseph's Children's Hospital who ordered more comprehensive MRIs before removing the tumor that was putting pressure on Cassidy's brain.

Two days later, after 10 hours of surgery, the MRI results had come in. The diagnosis was medulloblastoma, a common type of brain cancer found in the cerebellum. Even worse, Cassidy's cancer had already spread to several places in her spinal cord.

### EXPLORING TREATMENT OPTIONS

As a cancer surgeon, Kristen immediately started exploring treatment options.

"I looked around at that point in time and the best option that I could find was a clinical trial at St. Jude Children's Research

Hospital in Memphis," she said. "I told my department that I'm going to Memphis with Cassidy and they said, 'No problem, go do what you need to do.'"

Shortly after arriving in Memphis, Cassidy needed a second surgery to remove residual tumor that was left behind. Numerous complications followed, including a bout of meningitis that kept her in intensive care for several weeks. After she recovered, she went straight on to radiation therapy for six weeks, followed by a trip back home to Tampa.

In total, Cassidy spent nearly nine months in Memphis. All the while, Kristen's Moffitt family continued to support her from more than 800 miles away. Casey stayed home with their two other children, Ever and Indie, while they were in school.

"I mean I just was 100% shocked at the degree of support and consistent support through the whole thing," said Kristen.

A month into Cassidy's chemotherapy treatments, her doctors discovered her tumor not only had spread to her spinal cord but also was showing widespread bone metastases.

*"I just was 100% shocked at the degree of support and consistent support through the whole thing."*

"We knew it was kind of dire at that point," Kristen said, but Cassidy pressed on and ended up pushing through five months of chemotherapy. On May 26, Cassidy's ninth birthday, further complications began causing seizures. Cassidy's doctors believed it was caused by either a progression of her cancer in her spinal cord or spinal radiation necrosis.

"Cassidy became essentially quadriplegic," Kristen said. "She lost her legs, and her arms were really weak. Her doctors thought at that point she may not survive. They told us it's not a good idea to continue treatment and recommended hospice."

### A RETURN TO TAMPA

Once in hospice care, Cassidy became stable enough to return home to Tampa, which was very important to her. While the following months showed some signs of recovery and improvement, in November her trajectory once again took a downward turn.



Cassidy Otto ran 5K races, was a fashion aficionado and loved art in many forms.

“She was very adamant that we didn’t pursue any more treatment,” Kristen said. “She did not want to go back in the hospital. She did not want to go back on chemo. She fully understood the circumstances.”

Cassidy asked her parents if she was going to have pain. “No,” they said. “We’re not going to let that happen. That’s what the hospice doctors are for.”

Cassidy asked if dying would hurt or be scary. “No,” they said. “You’re going to go to heaven.”

The next day, Cassidy woke up and was happy. She had shown more strength than she had in several days. She told her little sister, Indie, she could have her bike, her toys and her virtual pets in her video game. She told her big brother, Ever, he could have her iPad.

Cassidy passed away on Christmas day.

In the days before she passed, her parents asked if she had any worries or if she was scared.

“She told us, ‘The only thing I’m worried about is that I may not be remembered,’” said Kristen. “So, we came up with a plan.”

*“She told us, ‘The only thing I’m worried about is that I may not be remembered.’”*

#### COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR A MEMORIAL 5K RUN

Cassidy decided she wanted her family to plant a tree for her.

“I asked her if she could sketch out what she was thinking of,” Kristen said. “And she made this pretty little garden with a fountain, pinwheel and flowers and a tree and a bench.”

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Otto family wasn’t able to truly honor or celebrate Cassidy’s life, but as the number of cases started to come down in early summer, an opportunity presented itself.

“My husband and I just finally felt like we could do something for Cass and I thought, ‘Well let’s do something even more meaningful than throwing a party,’” said Kristen. “I got together with some close friends and dreamed up this idea of doing a 5K.”

The Cassidy Otto Memorial 5K was born. Runners would don bright yellow T-shirts with cartoon avocado characters that Cassidy had drawn. There would be balloons, medals and



purple smoke at the starting line. Along the race, runners would even get to take a photo with a giant avocado cut out.

“I was a little nervous because I didn’t know how many people would be interested,” said Kristen. “I didn’t want to make it bigger than what I thought I could handle for this first go-round. We just put the invites out to my department and the surgeons at Moffitt and my neighbors in the community where I live.”

Olivia Luginski is a licensed clinical social worker at Moffitt, working with the Adolescent and Young Adult program. According to Luginski, the stages of grief are never going to be linear. It is a journey. It’s a reaction. The significance for Kristen to turn her loss into something that had a positive impact for others shouldn’t be understated.

“She really helped take a step in her grief journey by sharing that grief and reaching out to others and talking about it,” said Luginski. “Some parents dive into support and open up quickly. Others take a lot of time and stay private about their feelings. There’s no right or wrong way to grieve. There’s going to be emotional peaks and valleys. It’s beautiful when a parent finds acceptance and it can look like many different things. There are no guidelines to progress. Many accept it in different ways. It’s so important to find what coping strategies are out there and what works for you.”

Luginski said one of the best things a parent can do is rely on their loved ones. If you know someone such as a parent who has experienced a loss, an important way to support the individual is to remain present, empathetic and supportive. “You don’t need to always have the right things to say,” said Luginski. “Just being there to listen and being supportive helps. Goodbyes are painful, but they don’t have to do it alone.”

*“It’s so important to find what coping strategies are out there and what works for you.”*

#### FULFILLING A PROMISE

Kristen wasn’t alone. In fact, race attendance was double what she had expected. Hundreds of family members, friends, neighbors and Moffitt team members filled the streets of her neighborhood for the run. There were walkers, joggers and competitive runners all decked out in avocado T-shirts for Cassidy. She knew she wanted the event to be a fundraiser but was unsure at first where the money should go. So many organizations had a positive impact in Cassidy’s care. Eventually the choice became clear.

“I was basically away from work from September 2019 to July 2020 and Moffitt just showed undying support for us,” Kristen said. “When it came time to plan this event, my husband and I were going through the options of who we could raise money for, and we decided that it would be most meaningful to give to Moffitt. They deserve it.”

Not only did the attendance exceed her expectations, but donations did too. In total, the event raised more than \$14,000 in honor of Cassidy. Much of that money came from the celebration of life that followed the race, where Cassidy’s artwork was auctioned off.

“She loved drawing and painting and coloring,” said Kristen. “We went through all of her old notebooks and sketchbooks and turned those into canvas and auctioned them. Those went for \$4,000 alone. That told us that in the upcoming years we’re going to do something similar. The guests really appreciated being able to take something with them.”

The highlight of the day may not have been the avocados, the race itself or the auction. Rather, it was the fulfilling of a promise that Cassidy’s family made. Family and friends gathered around their backyard to formally dedicate Cassidy’s garden. There were memorial speeches, songs and stories from Cassidy’s friends and

family before Kristen invited guests to walk through the garden’s gravel path, to sit down at the bench next to the fountain, in front of the tree. Just like Cassidy had dreamed of in her final days.

Part of Cassidy’s ashes were spread into the fountain, ensuring she’ll always be a part of it. Kristen wears a necklace with another part of Cassidy’s ashes inside. Every night before bed she goes out to the garden to spend time with Cassidy, making sure she’s never forgotten.



*Kristen and Casey Otto along with their children, Indie and Ever, gather to honor Cassidy’s memory by spreading part of her ashes in the garden that was created based on her drawings.*

# TOM AND JEAN Bring Cleaning to Light

*A community finds creative solutions  
to address infection prevention*

By Amanda Sangster

Photos by Nicholas Gould and Kevin Kirby



In late 2020, Moffitt Cancer Center welcomed two UVD Robots® to its Magnolia Campus. The result of a generous donation by Gallo Medical Company, and facilitated by the Payton Wright Foundation, these robots bring cutting-edge technology to the center. What started as a simple idea to improve infection prevention standards evolved into a collaborative effort to enhance patient safety during a pandemic.

*“This is really a story about a community coming together for the greater good,” said Christine Gallo, CEO of Gallo Medical Company. “In times like these, you have to get creative in supporting each other. That’s what we did.”*

## FROM PAINFUL LOSS TO REINVENTION

Nearly nine years ago, Kevin Potts was diagnosed with brain cancer. He traveled the country seeking out expert opinions to receive the best possible care.

As Potts underwent intensive treatments, his wife, Christine Gallo, slept on a cot in his various hospital rooms for more than a year. She remained by her husband’s side as he battled not only brain cancer, but hospital-acquired pneumonia, Legionnaires’ disease and a staph infection. Feeling like they were fighting an uphill battle against preventable infections, Gallo began to wonder what could be improved.

“When you spend so much time in a place like that, there were critical areas that began to stand out to me,” said Gallo. “One of the areas that really bothered me was infection prevention. I kept thinking to myself that we must do better – we must find better technology. If your air and environment aren’t the best, how are you going to get better?”

When her husband was in the intensive care unit near the end of his journey, they began talking about how they could find better technology to address these issues. A robotics engineer himself, Potts wondered about technology that could purify and filter infections from the air. In those final moments, Gallo decided to change the direction of her medical supply company.

Emerging from the loss of her husband in 2014, Gallo was determined to reinvent her company’s mission. She diverted all her energy and resources toward infection prevention. Now, Gallo’s only goal is to create environments where patients can heal without the fear of infection.

She launched a division within her company specifically dedicated to infection prevention. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, she realized she wanted to grow this division and work only with suppliers that were interested in improving patient experience – not just increasing their profits at a time when families needed access to safe medical care.

Looking to expand what her company could offer in terms of infection prevention and on the hunt for the best technology on the market, Gallo discovered UVD Robots®, a Danish company that developed the first prototype of the ultraviolet (UV) disinfection robot. Gallo’s company was the first to bring this kind of autonomous technology overseas to the United

States, and one of her first stops in delivering this technology was Moffitt Cancer Center.

“I just knew this product would change the landscape of health care,” said Gallo. “I began wondering how we could give back as a company and thought about how great it would be if we could raise enough money to donate this technology to a hospital in need.”

After finding generous benefactors, Gallo was able to secure the donation through the Payton Wright Foundation, a local organization dedicated to assisting families who have children being treated for brain and spinal cord malignancies. She already had deep connections with them through her own fundraising for brain cancer. Now all she needed was a hospital.

Fortunately, Moffitt was already at the forefront of Gallo’s mind for two reasons. First, the center previously had reached out about purchasing the equipment long before COVID-19 took hold of the world. Second, both of Gallo’s parents are patients at Moffitt. And like many other patients, both canceled their routine appointments out of fear of COVID-19.

“As a company, we have a soft spot for cancer,” said Gallo. “Everyone on my team has experienced it personally. We’ve always been looking for a great impact to make, but this just came together organically. It was a full collaboration, and the timing was perfect. And it all started with just a text message I sent to Jay Wright on Giving Tuesday.”

## GIVING TUESDAY

Jay Wright is the director of Moffitt’s Department of Supply Chain. His team is responsible for sourcing Moffitt’s equipment and supplies. Always looking 10 steps ahead, Wright contacted Gallo Medical Company long before the pandemic in search of this same autonomous, robotic technology.

“The autonomous units just make it so much easier to protect our patients,” said Wright. “At the time I first approached Gallo Medical Company looking for these robots, no one knew the pandemic was going to hit. We just knew this was the direction we wanted to go in.” However, due to budget constraints at the time, Moffitt had to put the purchase on hold.

But Gallo didn’t forget about Wright or Moffitt’s readiness to take infection prevention to the next level.



Terrence Wright, left, vice president of Facilities and Support Services, and Tony Sanders, director of Environmental Services, keep these UVD Robots busy at Moffitt. They generate ultraviolet-C light that destroys bacteria, viruses and other harmful microbes by damaging their DNA and RNA.

*“The autonomous units just make it so much easier to protect our patients.”*

The Tuesday following Thanksgiving is a holiday known as Giving Tuesday. Directly following Black Friday when Americans are encouraged to spend money, Giving Tuesday encourages people to give to their favorite charities and perform acts of service. It was on Giving Tuesday of 2020 that Gallo texted Wright out of the blue. Hopeful that Moffitt was still interested in this technology, Gallo asked Wright if the cancer center would accept the donation.

Moffitt immediately seized the opportunity. “Gallo could have chosen any other hospital, but she chose Moffitt because of her connection to cancer,” said Wright. “To me, it really shows the community looking out for one another. I truly believe in my heart of hearts that Gallo Medical Company was trying to do what was best for us.”

What quickly ensued was a coordinated effort with Moffitt and Gallo Medical Company to get the robots on-site. Teams across the center including Facilities, Supply Chain, Environmental Services and Infection Prevention quickly mobilized to expedite the process and ensure the robots would be in working order as soon as possible.

The only costs to Moffitt would be the training and programming of the robots, but Gallo Medical Company made sure that came free as well. Sales Engineer Mike Price and Senior Product Specialist Phil Hughes both lost their own fathers to brain cancer. When it came time to quote these additional services, they also donated their time and labor – making this donation truly a gift to Moffitt.

Within a few short months, two UVD Robots® arrived on Moffitt’s Magnolia Campus, ready to be put to work. There was still one final decision to make, though. The robots needed names.

**MEET TOM 1 AND JEAN 2**

Gallo’s parents are both patients at Moffitt. Her father, Tom, has been treated for low-grade lymphoma and kidney cancer for nearly 15 years. Moffitt cleared her mother, Jeanne, of a misdiagnosis for breast cancer over a year ago. Like many other patients, both Tom and Jeanne delayed their annual visits, fearful that being in a hospital could lead to contracting COVID-19.



The Gallo Medical Company team has been personally touched by cancer, including, from left, sales engineer Mike Price, senior product specialist Phil Hughes, assistant controller Tony Brunk and CEO Christine Gallo.

*“As a company, we have a soft spot for cancer. Everyone on my team has experienced it personally. We’ve always been looking for a great impact to make, but this just came together organically.”*

– Christine Gallo, Gallo Medical Company

*Carlos Irizarry, Environmental Services lead, maintains the UV Robots as they travel through hallways and disinfect without human interference.*

This was one of the reasons Gallo reached out to Moffitt when she had the donation ready. In honor of her parents, the robots were named Tom 1 and Jean 2.

The robots are currently programmed to disinfect Moffitt's operating rooms, pre-operative rooms, the Bone Marrow Transplant clinic, various waiting areas, post-anesthesia care units and clinical exam rooms. But Tom 1 and Jean 2 are learning to clean new spaces every day.

Teamed up with Moffitt's Environmental Services Lead Carlos Irizarry, Price can still be found wandering the halls of Moffitt every week searching for new and uncharted territory to map for the robots.

Currently, the robots are controlled through tablets and led toward their designated sites manually. Eventually, the robots will be fully autonomous, traveling through Moffitt unattended, on their own schedule, and able to arrive at their designated locations without any staff assistance.

Patients and visitors shouldn't worry about crossing paths with the robots. They have built-in sensors and cameras that can detect human beings, meaning that Tom 1 and Jean 2 will maneuver around someone and will never expose an unprotected person to the UV radiation they emit.

However, people are bound to hear the robots before they ever see them traveling down the halls. The robots also play music from playlists still to be determined.

#### THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE LIGHT

At Moffitt, ultraviolet technology is used by a variety of teams. Research labs use it to decontaminate their water supply for experiments, while the Department of Environmental Services has used UV lamps to sterilize and disinfect surfaces. At the beginning of the pandemic, the majority of Moffitt's UV disinfectant equipment was reassigned to a new purpose: disinfecting N-95 masks for reuse as the national medical supply chains crippled under demand.



The science behind industrial UV disinfection has been in use for nearly a century. Although COVID-19 only recently brought ready-to-purchase, "germicidal" UV lamps to the endcaps of local stores, the technology first became commercially available in the 1930s. Since then, it's been used across a variety of industries for decontamination, including water treatment plants and air conditioning units.

UV radiation is a natural, chemical-free decontaminant with the most common form being sunlight. Using robotics, UV radiation is re-created using artificial sources like lamps and lasers, specifically the shortest wavelengths called UVC rays. In the natural environment, UVC rays never penetrate beyond the atmosphere's ozone layer.

When the DNA of a cell absorbs UVC rays, the energy causes the thymine molecules to react which then causes the genetic sequence to become disrupted. Once this disruption occurs, cells can no longer grow and replicate, and cell death becomes inevitable. Bacteria and viruses are inactivated, meaning they can no longer cause infection.

Tony Sanders, director of the Department of Environmental Services, says the robots give Moffitt an extra edge in patient protection. "What makes the UV robots so cutting edge is that they are mobile and autonomous," said Sanders. "We can free up our staff to address other important areas. Honestly, this is the future of health care."

With normal, stationary UV lamps, there are unavoidable obstacles that make them a less effective means of disinfection. Shadows prevent UVC rays from touching every contaminated surface while distance requires the continuous movement of the light source. These robots can be safely left alone for extended periods of time while they drive around and decontaminate environments that are potentially harboring dangerous microorganisms.

As Moffitt expands its footprint across Florida with the opening of its new inpatient surgical hospital in 2023, big plans are in store for this kind of technology. "We're building on the already tremendous and exceptional services provided by our team members," said Terrence Wright, vice president of Facilities and Support Services. "Our staff will feel safer, and patients and families will be able to heal in cleaner environments. This kind of technology will be the hallmark of Moffitt's infection prevention efforts moving forward."

#### HEALING FAMILIES

Gallo Medical Supply and Moffitt Cancer Center both value the impact that families can have on healing. Both understand that family members are a key part of a patient's care team. Christine Gallo remembers how it felt being with her husband during his cancer journey and treatment. She knows firsthand the impact family can have.

"We have to let families be together," said Gallo. "Watching families be separated during the pandemic was heartbreaking. This equipment may never touch a patient, but it helps them heal," said Gallo. "UV is just one tool in our toolkit to help patients and families be together. It helps families be in safer, cleaner environments so they can stay together. I wish we could donate 100 robots to Moffitt."

***"This equipment may never touch a patient, but it helps them heal."***



*Christine Gallo, left, shows off UVD Robots Tom 1 and Jean 2, named after her parents Tom and Jeanne Gallo, who were both treated at Moffitt.*

### ABOUT MOFFITT CANCER CENTER

Moffitt Cancer Center in Tampa, Florida, has made a lasting commitment to the prevention and cure of cancer, working tirelessly in the areas of patient care, research and education.

### MISSION

To contribute to the prevention and cure of cancer

### VISION

To transform cancer care through service, science and partnership

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Register or Donate at  
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We continue to monitor the COVID-19 pandemic, and at this time, it is our hope that participants will be able to safely join the event in-person or virtually this November. Of course, we will continue to evaluate CDC and state guidelines and provide updates.

Visit [Moffitt.org](https://Moffitt.org) to find out about our upcoming events

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