

A Gift For Giving And A Leap Of Faith

The Donor Behind Moffitt's First Endowed Research Chair

By Ann Miller Baker

TED COUCH STILL MOWS THE LAWN AT HIS INVERNESS FARM.

He shares this detail as he wipes the dust from his eyeglasses, dressed in a gray suit and tie for his role as chairman of the M2Gen Board of Directors. They will be meeting shortly to discuss the business of translating Moffitt's cancer research discoveries into marketable treatments.

And in that moment, you see his philosophy for a successful life — work hard, and love others enough to give of yourself and your talents. Couch has been doing just that for over 30 years. His gift for giving has had a monumental impact on Moffitt Cancer Center and the multitude of people it serves.

Couch was a 30-something real estate developer in the late 1970s when his business partner, the late George Cortner, introduced him to H. Lee Moffitt. The soon-to-be Speaker of Florida's House of Representatives was looking for someone to chair a new Health Care Authority overseeing state investment in medical facilities, a position Couch readily accepted.

When Moffitt shared his dream of a world-class cancer center to be built in Tampa, he found an ally in Couch, whose sister had been diagnosed with melanoma. "There was no place for her to go for cutting-edge care other than to Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York or to MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston," he says. "I helped her for about three years, going back and forth to Houston. As a result of that, I was highly motivated by Lee's idea."

So motivated, in fact, that Moffitt's next request only briefly fazed Couch.

"I was in my late 30s when Lee asked if I would consider endowing a chair in cancer research. I had no philanthropic experience at that time," Couch chuckles, recalling the amount. "When he told me \$600,000 to be matched \$400,000 by the state, I said, 'Lee, I don't have that kind of money. How am I

going to do this?' He said, 'Oh, don't worry — you can do it on the installment plan.' And by that he meant we had six years to fund it."

With his partner Cortner's blessing, Couch made the leap of faith that would establish Moffitt Cancer Center's first endowed research chair. And — almost magically, he says — business revenue increased each subsequent year to more than cover those "installments."

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Couch's contributions to Moffitt Cancer Center have been more than financial. He was a founding member of the Moffitt Board of Directors, named chairman in 1993. The highlight of his term, he says, was the honor of announcing in 1998 that Moffitt had achieved National Cancer Institute (NCI) designation in recognition of scientific leadership and research excellence.

"What was really remarkable is that we, the people of Moffitt and the researchers that we had assembled, did that in four to five short years. We achieved NCI status over and above institutions and cancer centers around the country that had been trying to accomplish this for 15 to 20 years." And just three years later, Moffitt Cancer Center was awarded the prestigious NCI Comprehensive Cancer Center designation, having demonstrated strengths across all areas of cancer research.

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Photography: Jeremy Peplow

Swiftly building a cadre of top-notch researchers, Couch says, was made possible through attitude. “You have to figure that a researcher has their career on the line. Why would they want to come to a brand new upstart cancer center? It had to be the attitude of the people that were here then that could attract them to Moffitt.”

Sharing that attitude of collaboration and mission-driven determination is part of what led Couch to fund another effort at Moffitt in 1999, the Ted Couch Cancer Research Lectureship. It allows Moffitt researchers to suggest a national or international scientific pioneer to present on their area of expertise, right here in the cancer center’s Vincent A. Stabile Research Building Auditorium that bears the name of Couch and his wife, Marty.

Among the internationally renowned guest lecturers, there have been stellar talents like the late E. Donnall Thomas, M.D., a Nobel laureate whose pioneering work in bone marrow transplantation changed the world of cancer treatment; Charles L. Sawyers, M.D., co-developer of the drug Gleevec® that revolutionized treatment of chronic myeloid leukemia; the late Judah Folkman, M.D., who founded the field of angiogenesis research and many others.

The lectures not only expose Moffitt researchers to top thought leaders, Couch notes, they also give guest lecturers a taste of Moffitt’s facilities and culture. “And who knows? Maybe after being exposed to Moffitt, they would want to come join us.”

Guest lecturers also present a second talk to the community “to help the public to understand what’s here,” Couch explains. “When you listen to how research happens and hear the results

of that research, it helps you understand why the investment dollars are needed in order to continue to promote this research.”

And make no mistake, Couch says, research and the resources to support it are what’s needed for Moffitt to accomplish its mission of contributing to the prevention and cure of cancer.

“Cancer isn’t just one cancer. It’s probably 70 different cancers. We’re whittling away at them, little by little. But it’s going to take probably another 30 years before we really can say that we’ve successfully beat back cancer. And it takes resources in order to do that. That’s how people can join us and help us.

“You obviously are not able to count on government funding consistently ... which is all the more reason why we have to appeal to everyone around us to support what we’re doing. Carve out a little of what you have, help us with the research. Research is what’s going to get it done.”

Looking back over 30 years and remembering the scrub oaks and sand spurs from which this world-class cancer center has risen, Couch says Moffitt has come “light years” since its opening in 1986. To his friend Lee Moffitt, Couch says “thanks” for the tenacity needed to make the center a reality — and for the opportunity to be a part of it.

“To be able to say that this is in Tampa, Florida, a city that I was born in and grew up in — being part of Moffitt Cancer Center has been probably the most rewarding thing that’s occurred in my life.” 📍