



JULIO POW-SANG, M.D.

Photography: Ray Reyes

A COURAGEOUS ENDEAVOR

From Peru To Mexico To Moffitt

By Michelle Bearden

GROWING UP IN LIMA, PERU, JULIO POW-SANG, M.D., NEVER WRESTLED WITH HIS CAREER ASPIRATIONS.

From the time he was a youngster, he always knew he would be a urologic oncologist. Just like his father, a man he so admires.

He saw how his dad cared not only for patients, but their families as well. That kind and thoughtful manner was something Dr. Pow-Sang vowed to emulate when he, too, became a physician.

“He’s my hero,” says Dr. Pow-Sang, chair of the Genitourinary Oncology Department at Moffitt Cancer Center. “He’s been my guiding light all my life. Not just in the profession, but how to conduct myself personally.”



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Had it all gone according to plan, Dr. Pow-Sang, the oldest of 10 children, would have joined his father’s practice in Lima after completing his medical studies in Mexico and the United States. That would have been the natural progression.

Then came the call in 1988 from a former professor at the University of Miami, where he did his residency.

“He told me about a new cancer center called Moffitt in Tampa. I never heard of it, so I had to look it up,” he recalls. “Back then, the only names you heard of were MD Anderson and Sloan-Kettering.”

A RISKY DECISION IS BASED ON CONFIDENCE

“It all intrigued me,” Dr. Pow-Sang says. “To be part of something from the beginning, to grow along with it. It was a big idea to think you could start from ground zero and build something so important.”

It took courage for Dr. Pow-Sang to leave his close-knit family behind in South America and establish roots in a new country, far from the life he had once imagined. And coming to a cancer center that was hardly established with no national reputation was risky.

But he had confidence in Moffitt’s mission. Fast-forward nearly three decades, and the trajectory of Dr. Pow-Sang’s career has risen along with the cancer center’s growth.

Moffitt has developed an interdisciplinary approach to medicine, and it has an international program geared toward welcoming foreign patients and providing assistance to those with language and cultural barriers. Most certainly, Moffitt has exceeded Dr. Pow-Sang’s vision as a research institution.

Among his own accomplishments: Getting named chief of surgery and founder of the robotics program, working as a principal investigator for several clinical trials in genitourinary cancer and serving as a member of the prostate cancer guidelines panel for the National Comprehensive Cancer Network. Along the way, he also earned his master’s in business administration from the University of South Florida. And he’s been named one of the Best Doctors in America since 1998.

On a personal level, Dr. Pow-Sang credits the center for finding his soulmate. He says it was “love at first sight” when he met Kathy, a West Virginia native working as a certified urology technician in charge of urodynamics. They married and adopted a baby girl from Peru, now an artsy 19-year-old studying cosmetology.

“A good decision, in so many ways, he says of choosing Moffitt. He can’t really explain it, but a fascination with urology runs in the Pow-Sang family.

There’s him and his father, along with a sister and brother who practice the specialty. Even a brother-in-law left a successful career in insurance to become a urologist.

The biggest challenge Dr. Pow-Sang sees in his field? Getting men to talk about this aspect of their health – and taking action on it by getting information regarding the risk and benefits of screening that could lead to early detection of life-threatening cancers.

Some 20,000 to 30,000 men die each year from prostate cancer. It’s the second-leading cause of death among men. He is seeing more awareness and discussion, but “not enough” among ethnic groups like Hispanics and African-Americans.

That’s why he takes part in Moffitt’s annual Men’s Health Forum at University of South Florida, a bi-lingual event that includes educating men about the risks and benefits of screenings, health-education workshops, fitness demonstrations and more. The more at ease men can be discussing health concerns, “the more lives will be saved. Plain and simple,” Dr. Pow-Sang says.

The good news is that prostate cancer, which is typically slow growing, is easily treatable when indicated if detected early.

“In some situations, the treatment can cause more problems and side effects than the actual cancer,” Dr. Pow-Sang says. “So we look at every case individually. I urge my patients to be aware and educated.”

Tampa restaurateur Richard Gonzmart is an example of that kind of patient.

In 2005, a friend asked Gonzmart to be part of the board of the Advanced Prostate Cancer Collaboration. He agreed. Not only because of the good work it did, but for personal reasons; his grandfather died of prostate cancer at age 70, and his father died of pancreatic cancer at age 72.

Through his meetings on the board, he mentioned to Dr. Pow-Sang that his doctor didn’t believe in having an annual PSA testing. Dr. Pow-Sang said that was wrong, given Gonzmart’s family history. So Gonzmart got a new doctor and began twice yearly checkups. After a slight spike in the level in 2013, Dr. Pow-Sang did a biopsy.

And that’s when Gonzmart learned he had prostate cancer. At first, like anyone else, he was shocked. Dr. Pow-Sang quickly put his fears to rest.

“He gave me such confidence that everything would be ok,” Gonzmart recalls. They spoke in detail about possible procedures. “I just appreciated his sincerity, him being compassionate and comforting to my wife, and letting her know I would be ok.”

Though Dr. Pow-Sang told Gonzmart he had other options

besides Moffitt to pursue treatment, he never considered it.

“I had so much confidence in him that I didn’t even contemplate another facility,” he says.

Today, Gonzmart is cancer-free. He’s become a tireless spokesman for regular screenings and sponsors two annual races that raise funds for APCC and research. He credits early detection and prompt treatment for his full recovery.

Dr. Pow-Sang wants to see a lot more success stories like that.

“New tests are coming out. People like Richard are speaking out. It’s an exciting field to be in, with all the breakthroughs we’re seeing,” he says.

ZEST FOR LIFE; EVER LEARNING

Dr. Pow-Sang’s passion is not limited to medicine, thanks to his parents instilling a love of education and humanities in their children as well. For the last 10 years, he’s taken online courses in journalism and writing, with dreams of writing science books one day. One of his favorite authors is Siddhartha Mukherjee, an Indian-born American physician and oncologist who wrote “The Emperor of All Maladies” and “The Gene: An Intimate History.”

Dr. Pow-Sang is also fluent in English, Spanish and French, and speaks conversational Spanish and Italian. Knowing other languages gives him a better understanding of different cultures and their perspective in the global picture.

“The world is a big boat and we’re all in this together,” Dr. Pow-Sang says. It’s a lesson he learned at home: His father is of Chinese and Peruvian descent, and his mother is Peruvian and Spanish.

“I’m like a kid walking into Disneyland when I walk through those doors. This place is magic to me and I’m so happy to be part of it.”

His hero continues to inspire him. Dr. Pow-Sang’s father, also named Julio, is 89 and shows no signs of slowing down. He cooks, composes music and plays the violin. Now spending much time in the U.S., he still sees the occasional patient when back in Peru.

That zest for life is something Dr. Pow-Sang has obviously inherited.

“Every day I go to work at Moffitt is like a new experience,” he says. “I can’t pick a favorite moment or story because there are so many of them. I’m like a kid walking into Disneyland when I walk through those doors. This place is magic to me and I’m so happy to be part of it.”