

# REMEMBERING Dr. Charles C. Williams

By Ann Miller Baker

## If anyone lived Moffitt's mission, it was Dr. Charles Williams.

### HE HAD BEEN HERE SINCE DAY ONE, WHEN MOFFITT'S DOORS OPENED IN 1986.

He spent the next three decades building a lasting legacy in the treatment and research of lung cancer until his tragic death in an auto accident on March 28, 2018.

"Charlie was a mentor for most of Moffitt's medical oncologists for more than 30 years. He set the standard for medical oncology and patient care, consistently demonstrating selfless dedication to the success and well-being of others," said Moffitt's Physician-in-Chief Doug Letson.

Williams' impact was far-reaching, judging by the standing-room-only crowd honoring him in a Celebration of Life at Moffitt's Ted & Marty Couch Auditorium on April 10. Along with his wife Debbie and daughter Sara, Moffitt colleagues, alumni and patients gathered to remember Williams with stories, tears and the laughter he loved.

Moffitt President and CEO Alan List, MD, described Williams as a leader in thoracic oncology, a principal investigator on many of Moffitt's early clinical trials who cared for thousands of patients. "Charlie was always their advocate, placing them first," said List. It was no surprise when Williams was named Moffitt's Physician of the Year in 2010, an honor he cherished. "But the thing I will always remember about Charlie was his dry wit," said List. "He always made you smile."

Karen Fields, MD, a Moffitt medical oncologist specializing in breast cancer, remembered when Williams' first wife, Faye, was diagnosed and looking for a physician to provide treatment. "When a colleague asks you to care for their loved one, that's an honor," said Fields. After Faye died, Fields said grief took its toll on Williams. "We lost our Charlie for a while. That light in his eyes and the dry humor disappeared until Debbie Simanteris entered his life and became his second wife," said Fields. "Charlie loved dearly and was dearly loved."

Vicki Caraway, Moffitt's senior director of Ambulatory Nursing and Debbie's close friend since their days as Bone Marrow Transplant Unit nurses in the early '90s, remembered watching the relationship between Debbie and Charlie blossom. Caraway

described running into the pair on one of their first dates – Debbie in a white pantsuit and Charlie all in black. "They looked like ebony and ivory on a keyboard," said Caraway. "But in reality, they were more yin and yang, completing each other." Williams, she said, gave so much to so many that "there are no words to do justice to a life that was so full and rich."

Williams' longtime nurse Andrea Shaffer said the death of her former colleague "was like losing my father – he was a hero to me." She credited Williams for seeing her potential and encouraging her to become a nurse practitioner, a major step in her path to becoming a director in Moffitt Nursing Administration.

Jhanelle Gray, MD, a Moffitt medical oncologist and director of clinical research in Thoracic Oncology, trained under Williams before working beside him. Williams was "the glue in our work family," said Gray. She recalled an after-work invitation to dine out with the Williamses and their friends. After hours of jokes and conversation, the bill came — and Gray and her husband realized they'd never even touched their meals. They'd been having too much fun to eat.

Lary Robinson, MD, a Moffitt surgeon and Williams' longtime colleague in Thoracic Oncology, remembered him as "my closest friend for a quarter of a century. I just never realized it until he was gone." With offices a few doors apart and busy days seeing patients in clinic, the two teased each other incessantly. "I suspect we never had a serious conversation about anything, ever, unless it was medical," said Robinson.

There were "inside jokes" — about Williams' imaginary tractor and its perpetually flat tires, his "mustache movement" that had everyone growing facial hair ("even some of the ladies," Williams joked), his fascination with alpacas, saxophone lessons, an ever-expanding collection of crazy-patterned socks and his imaginary girlfriend Bertha.

But behind all the jokes, added Robinson, Williams was the consummate clinician, the go-to expert on perplexing cases who would always find time to reassure and counsel patients.

Pastor Mike Holland, who counts the Williams family among



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his congregation at Ahava Baptist Church in Plant City, recalled the words of another worshipper who trained under Dr. Williams. "He told her, 'It's not our job to relieve pain. It's our job to lessen the suffering by sitting on the bed next to that patient, looking them in the eyes and saying, 'We will fight this together.' ' That's hope, a medicine you can neither buy nor manufacture. We need it. And we need more like Charlie who could deliver it so well," said Holland.

Outside the memorial gathering, Robinson shared his firm belief that his good friend is not resting in peace — "that's a saying I really hate. He's probably having a ball right now in a far better, extraordinary place."

Robinson imagined his friend atop a tractor, finally with four functioning tires, his saxophone in his lap. Gathered round him for the music, there's a herd of alpacas wearing fake mustaches and crazy socks. "And Charlie's happy as a clam," said Robinson, "just waiting for the rest of us to get to that same place someday."

Until then, his Moffitt family will remember Charlie with a smile — especially when the "best of the best" among its physicians is chosen each year for a newly named honor: Moffitt's Dr. Charles C. Williams Physician of the Year Award.

**THERE COULD BE NO BETTER NAMESAKE.** 🍷