

Heartfelt

By Nancy Sokoler Steiner



Dr. Juan C. “Chuck” Alejos has been traveling to Peru since the 1990s to treat children with cardiac disease and train physicians in that country in the latest surgical and medical-management techniques.

Photo: Courtesy of Dr. Juan C. Alejos

When, soon after he completed fellowship training, his father died, Juan C. Alejos traveled to Lima, Peru, to retrace his dad’s path to becoming a physician. It was, after all, his father who had inspired “Chuck” Alejos, MD (RES ’90, FEL ’93), to pursue medicine. As a youngster, he sometimes would accompany his father on rounds. Other times, his father would play recordings of heart sounds for his son to identify. “He worked countless hours and was on call 24/7, but he was very happy, and he had a strong bond with his patients,” says Dr. Alejos, a pediatric cardiologist at UCLA Mattel Children’s Hospital. “I could see his love for what he did, and it got to the point where I couldn’t imagine doing anything else.”

In Lima, Dr. Alejos visited his father’s medical school — though he was educated in Peru, the elder Dr. Alejos never practiced there; he emigrated to the United States and practiced as a pediatrician in Detroit, Michigan — as well as the country’s only

children’s hospital, Instituto Nacional de Salud del Niño, where his father would have trained. There, Dr. Alejos met the hospital’s chief of staff and offered to return to give lectures on pediatric cardiology. She responded by asking him to give demonstrations instead.

He did more than that. He returned with another cardiologist and a cardiothoracic surgeon, and the three UCLA physicians performed heart procedures on several patients. So began a tradition of annual medical missions bringing volunteer medical teams, along with donated supplies and medications, to treat children with congenital heart disease and provide advanced training for Peruvian surgeons, physicians and staff.

Dr. Alejos formalized the effort in 2005 and created the non-profit Hearts with Hope Foundation — Corazones con Esperanza. Peru remains a major focus, but the missions have expanded into other Latin American countries as well as the Philippines. The missions may vary in size and scope, but most bring about 30 volunteers — including teams specializing in surgery, intensive care, cardiac catheterization, echocardiography and general pediatrics — for one week to perform about a dozen heart surgeries and twice that number of cardiac catheterization procedures. In Peru, the effort has grown to include general pediatric and dental teams that travel around the country, bringing services to close to 5,000 children. About half of the volunteers are affiliated with UCLA, while the rest hail from throughout the U.S. and abroad.

Since 2006, Hearts with Hope has performed 136 open heart surgeries, 245 cardiac catheterizations, 1,069 diagnostic cardiac echocardiograms and 59 ablations and pacemaker implants. “The most challenging thing is that we are not able to save them all, but we want to show that saving many of these children — maybe even most of them — is doable,” says Dr. Alejos, who today is director of UCLA’s Pediatric Heart Transplantation/Heart Failure Program and director of the Pediatric Pulmonary Hypertension Program. “Our goal is to build on these efforts, so that the doctors in the countries where we work can learn how to better perform these procedures on their own.”

He notes that when he first started the missions, the cardiac surgeons in Peru were doing procedures that were equivalent to those done in the U.S. 30 years earlier. Now, however, their knowledge and skills have caught up. In addition, the Peruvian

government added congenital heart disease as a covered condition after Hearts with Hope demonstrated that it can be treated successfully.

With limited time and resources, the Hearts with Hope team focuses on helping those children who have the best chance of recovering and thriving. Sometimes, Dr. Alejos admits, he breaks with his own protocol. In one instance, the team encountered a baby whose blood was flowing from his lungs into the wrong chamber of his heart. The baby needed immediate surgery but had croup, a sometimes serious respiratory infection. It would be unsafe to operate. Dr. Alejos reluctantly told the family he could not help.

But something, he said, “tugged at my heartstrings.” Dr. Alejos admitted the baby to the hospital for antibiotics and respiratory treatments. At the end of the week, he made a leap of faith and cleared the baby for surgery. “He did phenomenally. And who knows? That child could go on to be a senator or president,” Dr. Alejos says.

“It taught me that you can’t always follow hard-and-fast rules. Sometimes you have to go with your gut and your heart.”

Dr. Alejos’s father would surely be proud of his son’s heartfelt efforts to help children who are most in need, and that caring appears to be embedded in the family DNA. Both of Dr. Alejos’s daughters have chosen a caring path — his older daughter Alex will graduate from medical school this year, and his younger daughter Gabriela received her master’s degree in social work and is working at the UCLA/VA Veterans Family Wellness Center. So continues a legacy of heart.

“We know that what we are doing is not going to fix the world, and we are not going to save every child,” Dr. Alejos says. “But we can make a small dent. We have to do the best that we can.”

Nancy Sokoler Steiner is a freelance writer in Los Angeles.



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Photos: Courtesy of Dr. Juan C. Alejos

Awards & Honors

Three faculty members of the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA received National Institutes of Health High-Risk, High-Reward Research Program awards. **Dr. Olujimi Ajjola (FEL '13, '14)**, assistant professor of medicine, received the New Innovator Award; **Dr. Anne Andrews**, Richard Metzner Endowed Chair in Clinical Neuropharmacology and professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences, received the Transformative Research Award; and **Dr. Valerie Arboleda (PhD '12, MD '14, RES '17)**, assistant professor-in-residence in pathology and laboratory medicine, received the Early Independence Award. The awards support scientists who propose innovative, high-risk or unconventional biomedical research projects with the potential for unusually broad impact.

Dr. Carrie Bearden, professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences, was named to the scientific council of the Brain and Behavior Research Foundation, the nation's top

non-governmental funder of mental health research grants.

Dr. Joaquin Fuster, emeritus distinguished professor in psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences, and **Dr. Otoniel Martinez-Maza (PhD '81)**, professor of obstetrics and gynecology, epidemiology and microbiology, immunology and molecular genetics, have been named fellows of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Dr. Neal Halfon, founding director of the UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities, received the American Academy of Pediatrics' C. Anderson Aldrich Award in Child Development.

Dr. Connie Kasari (FEL '90), professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences and a founding member of the Center for Autism Research and Treatment in the Jane and Terry Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA, received the Acceleration Award from Autism Speaks.

Dr. Kelsey Martin, dean of the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, was appointed by California Gov. Jerry Brown to the Governor's Advisory Committee on Precision Medicine.

Dr. Vishad Nabili (RES '07, FEL '07), associate professor of clinical head and neck surgery and director of the Otolaryngology/Head and Neck Surgery Residency Training Program, was named the 2018 recipient of the Parker J. Palmer Courage to Teach Award from the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education.

Dr. David Reuben (FEL '88), chief of the Division of Geriatrics, accepted the SCAN Foundation's first Innovation in Health Care Award on behalf of the UCLA Alzheimer's and Dementia Care Program.

Dr. Jeffrey Saver, professor of clinical neurology and director of the UCLA Comprehensive Stroke Center, received a Gold Heart Award, the American Heart Association's highest

volunteer honor. In addition, Dr. Saver was presented with the association's Meritorious Achievement award.

Dr. Michael Steinberg (RES '81), director of clinical affairs at the UCLA Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center, has received the American Society for Radiation Oncology 2017 Gold Medal for his lifetime contributions in the field of radiation oncology.

In Memoriam

Dr. Christian Herrmann, Jr., professor emeritus of neurology, died October 23, 2017. He was 96 years old. He entered medical school in 1941, and during World War II, he served at the Naval Medical Center San Diego. He came to UCLA in 1954 as the second faculty member in the Division of Neurology. As assistant professor of medicine in neurology, he was responsible for teaching as well as running a number of specialty clinics. He retired as professor emeritus

in 1986 but continued to come to campus to do credentialing and to share his knowledge with the department's trainees.

Dr. W. Eugene Stern, founding chief of neurosurgery and former chair of surgery at UCLA, died on July 27, 2017. He was 97 years old. Dr. Stern joined the UCLA faculty in 1952 as chief of the Division of Neurosurgery in the new Department of Surgery and held that position until 1985. During his tenure, Dr. Stern established neurosurgical affiliations with the Wadsworth (now Greater Los Angeles) Veterans Administration Medical Center and with Harbor General Hospital (now Harbor-UCLA Medical Center), and he elevated the neurosurgery faculty and residency program to national prominence. The W. Eugene Stern Endowed Chair in Neurosurgery was named in his honor. In addition, he was chair of the Department of Surgery from 1981 to 1987.