Cancer survivors, loved ones celebrate at Festival of Life

By Douglas Morino

They came together to celebrate survival in the face of fear and uncertainty.

For the hundreds of cancer survivors who gathered at the Keck Medical Center of USC on a recent Saturday morning, the Festival of Life was more than that: It was a celebration of hope, perseverance and a new year of living each day to the fullest. "Cancer gives you a real appreciation for what life is really all about," said emcee Art Ulene, MD, a USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center advisory board member and former "Today Show" medical correspondent. The June 6 event marked the 25th annual Festival of Life, an event honoring cancer survivors and their loved ones. Ulene, who went through his own cancer scare, hosts the festival each year. He urged cancer survivors and their loved ones to appreciate their lives and strive to make each day a new beginning.

Conjoined twins in Haiti separated by USC surgeons

By Lorenzo Benet, CHLA

A 18-member team of physicians and nurses from Keck Medicine of USC and Children’s Hospital Los Angeles (CHLA) recently led an international collaboration to separate a pair of six-month-old conjoined twins in Haiti, the first such operation ever performed in that country.

The twins, Marian and Michelle, were born one as one on Nov. 24, 2014. They were separated May 22 of this year during a seven-hour surgery at University Hospital of Mirebalais, which is in a poor rural community about 36 miles northeast of Haiti’s capital city, Port-au-Prince.

"The girls are doing fantastic," said Haitian-born surgeon team leader Henri Ford, MD, MHA, the surgeon in chief at CHLA, who is also vice dean for medical education and a professor and vice chair for clinical affairs at the Keck School of Medicine of USC. "It was an extremely exhilarating day; not only did our preparations pay off and the surgery succeed in spectacular fashion, but this was also a time to put politics aside and celebrate our national pride.”

Marian and Michelle — so-called omphalopagus twins who were connected at the abdomen — are actually triplets (sister Tamara was born separately and is healthy). The conjoined sisters had faced each other since birth, but they recuperated in separate beds in the hospital’s neonatal intensive care unit. They were ready to be discharged 12 days after surgery.

“We anticipate Marian and Michelle will recover fully and go on to lead healthy and happy lives,” Ford said. Conjoined twins occur in roughly 1 in 200,000 births, and omphalopagus twins represent about 30 percent of all conjoined twin births. As triplets, these girls are considered even rarer, occurring about once in 1 million births. Fused together by the breastbone (or xiphoid bone) in the lower portion of the sternum, Marian and Michelle were born separately and are ally triplets (sister Tamar was born separately and is healthy). The conjoined sisters had faced each other since birth, but they recuperated in separate beds in the hospital’s neonatal intensive care unit. They were ready to be discharged 12 days after surgery.

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Former Keck Medicine leader is new nursing chief at USC-VHH

A Keck Medicine of USC nursing veteran has returned to the organization to lead USC Verdugo Hills Hospital’s nursing staff. Theresa Murphy, RN, MSNA, CENP, joined USC-VHH on June 1 as chief nursing officer to lead the hospital’s nursing and patient care activities. Murphy spent one year as assistant chief nursing officer at St. Vincent Medical Center. Murphy takes on this role following the resignation of former USC-VHH CNO Janet Brooks.

“We thank Janet for her dedication and years of service to our organization,” said Paul Craig, RN, JD, interim CEO of USC-VHH and chief administrative officer of Keck Medicine of USC. “We wish Janet much success and, with Theresa, remain focused on maintaining a strong leadership team to support the delivery of compassionate, innovative, high-quality care.”

Murphy brings more than 20 years of experience in health care, including a decade working for Keck Medical Center of USC. During her tenure, she served in several nursing leadership roles, including nurse executive at USC Norris Cancer Hospital and associate administrator of the Keck Medical Center of USC.

“The organization has grown by leaps and bounds in the last year, and it’s exciting to be back at such a pivotal point in our organization’s history,” Murphy said. “I’m really looking forward to working with new and familiar faces to build upon the already strong, 40-year tradition of excellent nursing and patient care at USC-VHH.”

Murphy holds a bachelor’s in nursing from Cal State Los Angeles and a master’s in health care administration from Cal State Long Beach. She is also certified in executive nursing practice by the American Organization of Nurse Executives.

A cluster of circulating tumor cells (red) and white blood cells (green).

Researcher is named Pew-Stewart scholar

By Cristy Urrut

UC Irvine breast cancer researcher Min Yu, MD, PhD, is one of five early-career scientists to be named a 2015 Pew-Stewart scholar for cancer research. As part of this honor, she will receive $240,000 over four years to advance the understanding of metastatic breast cancer.

“I’m grateful for the support from the Pew-Stewart scholarship, which will provide the resources to propel my research forward,” said Yu, an assistant professor in USC Department of Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine and a member of the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center.

As a postdoctoral scholar, Yu devised a technique for growing and multiplying circulating tumor cells (CTCs) in the laboratory after filtering them out from blood drawn from breast cancer patients. CTCs contain a subpopulation of the most deadly cancer cells that have the ability to break away from the bloodstream and enter the blood circulation and form metastases in other tissues, such as the bone, brain and lungs. Metastasis is the leading cause of cancer-related death.

Yu is tackling the problem of metastasis by identifying the molecular adaptations and genetic mutations that allow CTCs to establish new tumors throughout the body. Her work could facilitate the development of strategies for blocking metastatic cancer on a patient-by-patient basis, ultimately saving lives.

Yu has devoted her energies to advancing patient care through innovative medical research for more than 15 years. Born and raised in the city of Qingdao in northeast China, Yu earned her medical degree at Shandong Medical University and completed a yearlong residency in neurology at Peking University Third Hospital. A hepatitis B carrier, Yu, like many patients suffering from incurable inherited neurological diseases, Yu recognized the need to find new treatments through medical research. She joined the PhD program in genetics at SUNY Stony Brook University and Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, where she developed an interest in breast cancer in the laboratory ofSenthil Muthusamy, PhD. She began researching CTCs during her postdoctoral training in the laboratory of Daniel A. Haber, MD, PhD, at Massachusetts General Hospital.

“During that time, I lost my own father to liver cancer and have completely devoted myself to relieving others from such pain,” she said. “As a result, I have dedicated myself to the field of cancer metastasis.”

Her dedication as well as her track record of success most earned her the recognition as a Pew-Stewart scholar, named in honor of the late scientist Charles and Margaret Stewart, one of the country’s leading cancer research institutions and supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Alexander and Margaret Stewart Trust.

Eye Symposium marks 40th year at USC for Ophthalmology

A capacity crowd of almost 120 ophthalmologists and optometrists is expected at a June 19 symposium that will mark the Department of Ophthalmology’s 40th anniversary at USC. The gathering at The Huntington in San Marino represents a “who’s who” in ophthalmology from around the country. Hosted by the USC Eye Institute under the direction of Rohit Varma, MD, MPH, the all-day symposium will be opened by USC president C. L. Max Nikias, PhD, Thomas E. Jackiewicz, MPH, senior vice president and CEO of Keck Medicine of USC, and Dean Carmen A. Puliafito, MD, MBA, of the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

At the symposium, speakers from Los Angeles Eye and Ear Medical Center, Moorfields Eye Hospital, University of California, San Francisco, San Diego Eye, University of California, Los Angeles, the National Eye Institute, National Institutes of Health, University of Southern California, and many other institutions will discuss a wide range of topics in ophthalmology.

University of California, Los Angeles, National Eye Institute, American Academy of Ophthalmology, American Optometric Association, American Society of Retinal Specialists, and the Optical Society of America are all partners in the symposium.

Among the distinguished panelists are Stanley Chang, MD, professor of ophthalmology at Columbia University Medical Center, and James K. Wyatt, MD, president of Wayne State University. The agenda includes other speakers from USC and from institutions such as Stanford University School of Medicine and the University of California, San Diego.

NIH Big Data grant will fund visual analysis project

The UCSC project to visualize and analyze connectivity networks in the mouse brain is among 15 new awards from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) tied to the development of biomedical Big Data applications.

Hong-Wei Dong, PhD, associate professor of Neurology in the USC Market and Mary Stevens Neuroimaging and Informatics Institute at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, will further develop software known as the Connection Lens to enable automated and visual analysis of the massive data sets accumulated by the Mouse Connectome Project, according to an NIH new release. Dong and his colleagues will also develop a new software tool known as the Projection Lens to enable the production of comprehensive connectivity diagrams.

These tools will enable researchers to drill down from comprehensive views to visualize connections between regions of interest in the mouse brain.

The awards come from an NIH initiative to fund innovative approaches to common challenges in biomedical data use.
Neural prosthetic device yields fluid motions by robotic arm

By Alison Trinidad

...
Michelle also had attached livers that were separated during the procedure.

Their mother, Manoucheca Ketan, 35, gave birth to all three of her daughters after carrying them for 36 weeks. The twins shared a crib until 10 a.m. on May 22, when Ketan and her husband, David Bernard, 33, watched as their infant daughters were wheeled into surgery as one. Ten hours later, after the surgery, the parents wept when they next saw the twins — resting in separate cribs.

“It was an extraordinary moment,” Ketan said, describing her reaction when she first saw her separated daughters. “When I first met Dr. Ford, he told me he was confident we could separate my children, but I didn’t know how it would turn out when the day started. Now I am feeling a lot of joy and want to recognize and thank the hospital for everything.”

The Keck/CHLA team was joined by two staff from CHLA’s International Division. Their team was available to safely do the operation.

The family received free treatment supported by the Haitian Ministry of Health and Partners in Health, an international health organization. Keck Medicine of USC and CHLA covered the travel expenses and medical team and donated supplies to ensure the success of the operation.

About 90 minutes into the operation, the girls were surgically separated to a burst of applause from the team. Then Marian was moved to an adjacent table.

Wearing red caps, Marian’s team of six doctors and nurses hovered over her to close her incision, while Michelle’s team worked in yellow caps — coincidentally reflecting the colors of USC. “The mom gave them red and yellow bands months ago to identify them,” Ford explained. “They were destined to be separated by USC surgeons.”

Michelle was wheeled out of the surgery suite at 4:45 p.m., followed by Marian at 4:54 p.m. “There are surgeries that require the expanded expertise of a [major hospital], but the twins’ anatomy and our team’s expertise allowed us to undertake the surgery in Haiti, and compile the appropriate resources to do the surgery there safely,” explained James Stein, who was lead surgeon during the separation.

Stein is associate chief of surgery at Children’s Hospital and an associate professor of surgery at the Keck School of Medicine.

The girls underwent 11 separate procedures, with only a few minor complications. Early on, Michelle’s heart rate elevated, but the surgeons — Stein, Ford and Aaron Jensen, MD, along with Keck Medicine of USC anesthesiologists Joanna E. Green, MD, an assistant professor of clinical anesthesiology, and Duc Nguyen, an associate professor of clinical anesthesia — remedied the situation by expeditiously separating the livers and individually hydrating the girls intravenously.

One moment during the operation seemed to sum up the enormity of the procedure for Ford. “Their lower chests were connected, so we had to use a piece of the sternum, the breastbone, and then you could see their lungs and their hearts beating,” he recalled.

Forty-eight hours after surgery, the girls were breathing independently, and after 72 hours they were being fed with a combination of breast milk and formula, Ford said.

Ford started recruiting his team in September after initial conversation with doctors in Haiti. Ford and team members made almost monthly trips to Haiti between the November births and the May 22 surgery, checking on the health of the girls and making sure that the proper human and material resources or equipment were available to safely do the surgery. By March, the team was set and the girls, strong and healthy, were scheduled for the procedure.

In the coming weeks, the girls will recover from their operations and undergo physical therapy to help strengthen neck muscles weakened from facing in a single direction for such a long time.

“The girls look great; we don’t expect any more surgeries,” Stein said. “The amazing part for all of us is conducting seven hours of surgery, and then seeing two kids side-by-side, when they used to be just one. It’s just awe-inspiring.”

The Keck/CHLA team consisted of surgeons Ford, Stein, Hahn and plastic surgeon Andre Panousian, MD, anesthesiologists Green and Nguyen, physician fellows Jamie M. Golden, MD, Aaron Jensen, MD, Abhishek Kurnwal, MD, Jeanine Lam, MD, and Chista Grant, MD, registered nurses Caitlin Fitzgibbons, BSN, Jodi Brown, BSN, Jennifer DeVera, BSN, Melinda Dizon, BSN, Maxine Ogbaa, BSN, and Nhu Tran, BSN; and respiratory therapist Dana Baxter, RRT.


Organ donor Javier Tiscareno gets a hug from his wife, Carmen, after telling his story at a recent news conference.

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Carolyn spoke at a recent news conference.

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Cancer survivors are celebrated

Continued from page 1

“We often take so much for granted, like life itself,” Ulene said to attendees during a ceremony featuring guest speakers, live music and a magician. “So every morning when you wake up, remember this day and live your life really well.”

The Festival of Life is hosted by the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center and is held every June in the Harry and Celesta Pappas Quad in conjunction with National Cancer Survivors Day. This year’s event featured about 750 cancer survivors and family members, 180 white doves, 50 volunteers, a six-member brass band and an Andalusian horse (and USC mascot) named Traveler.

The event serves as an opportunity for current and former USC Norris patients to celebrate life and catch up with physicians, nurses and staff who joined them on the journey through cancer treatment and recovery.

Attendee Raphael Martinez was diagnosed with colon cancer 12 years ago and treated at USC Norris. “I’m here to celebrate life,” said Martinez, who attends the festival each year. “I look forward to the opportunity to come back to USC and celebrate with my family and other survivors.”

Attendees, many wearing blue flower leis, sipped coffee and chatted as they strolled through the quad, stopping by information booths from organizations such as the American Cancer Society and Cancer Support Community in Pasadena.

Many attendees posed for pictures with Traveler, the USC mascot, as the sounds of the Bayou Brass Band echoed across campus.

Also on hand was Alex Morrison, who was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1987 and celebrated his 92nd birthday on June 5. Along with the care he received at USC Norris, he was able to make the eight-hour drive from Yuba City in Northern California to the Health Sciences Campus to visit with USC Norris staff members and other cancer survivors.

“The physicians and nurses here truly did save my life,” Case said, adding that he was able to see the birth of his eight grandchildren after receiving treatment. “Everybody here today has had the same experience. We don’t have to tell our stories, because we just know. It’s truly like being a part of another family.”

The ceremony concluded with a release of 100 white doves. As the birds soared, dark gray clouds began to make way for blue skies.

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The ceremony concluded with a release of 100 white doves. As the birds soared, dark gray clouds began to make way for blue skies. One of the featured speakers was Rick Huff, who received a diagnosis of prostate cancer two years ago. He shared his journey with those in attendance, adding that thanks in part to the care he received at USC Norris, he was able to witness the birth of his first grandson 21 months ago.

“God had another plan for me,” said Huff, who credited his family, friends and faith for helping him on his cancer journey. “I think that plan was to be here to watch my grandson grow.”

Huff told the crowd: “A cancer diagnosis is scary. But when you have positive people to surround yourself with, the journey becomes much easier.”

With help from volunteers he recruited from the crowd, magician Harvey Simpson drew plenty of laughs during the Festival of Life.

Two doctors provided special music at the celebration. Christina To, MD, a fellow in hematology/oncology, plays the violin, as Shelly Bian, MD, a resident physician in radiation/oncology, accompanies her on keyboards.

USC mascot Traveler during the 2015 Festival of Life.

As Joan Silver adds a message to a banner memorialising tales of survival, Kia McNaughton plays along.

Cancer survivor Teruko Kawada pauses with son Klas and husband Nori for a photo with USC mascot Traveler during the 2015 Festival of Life.
HSC Newsmakers
A roundup of news items related to Keck Medicine of USC, which may include philanthropic donations, research grants, publication in academic journals and mentions in the news media.

As a truck unloads school supplies and rice in a Liberian village devastated by Ebola, a little girl speaks to Kathryn Challoner.

Doctor gets humanitarian award
Kathryn Challoner, M.D., FACEP, voluntary faculty in the department of emergency medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, was recently awarded the 2015 Hu- manitarian Award by the California Chapter of the Ameri- can College of Emergency Physicians. Challoner spent several months treating Ebola patients in a rural hospital in Bong County, Liberia. She is also establishing an Ebola orphan relief project with Liberian colleagues. Challoner has a long-standing commitment to medical assistance in Africa and made several trips to Liberia prior to the Ebola outbreak. She had also visited Ghana to conduct workshops on emergency medicine and expanded the exchange program at LAC+USC Medical Center that brought Ghanaian doc- tors to Los Angeles to learn emergency medicine.

Go induced as ACR fellow
John Louis Go, MD, has been induced as a fellow in the American College of Radiology (ACR). The induction took place at a convocation ceremony during the ACR meeting May 17-21 in Washington, D.C. Go is director of head and neck imaging and an assistant professor of radiology and otolaryngology at the Keck School of Medicine of USC. He is member of the ACR, the California Radiological Society and is past president of the Los Angeles Radiological Society and the Western Neuroradiology Society. He is a member of the American Society of Neuroradiology and chairs the Technical Exhibits Committee and Computer Science and Informatics Committee, besides serving on the Executive and Program committees.

Javadar is voted president of national nuclear medicine society
Hossein Javadar, MD, PhD, was elected as the 2015-16 president of the Society of Nuclear Medicine and Molecular Imaging (SNMMI) dur- ing its annual meeting June 6-10 in Baltimore, Javadar, an associate pro- fessor of radiology and biomedical engineering at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, has a clear agenda, according to a news release from the society. “Over the next year, I will focus on developing ap- plications of nuclear medicine and molecular imaging for the quality and value of nuclear medicine and molecular imaging in this era of evidence-based medicine. I will also work to facilitate the timely clinical translation of novel radiotracers,” Javadar said. Specifically, he plans to encourage activities that will increase the appropriate utilization of targeted radiotracer therapy. Javadar has been an attend- ing physician at Keck Medical Center and a member of the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center since 1999.

Medical student earns fellowship
Timothy Wen, a third-year medical student at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, has been named as a Medical Student Fellow by the Congress of Neurological Surgeons (CNS). The organization is dedicated to advancing neuro- surgery by inspiring and facilitating scientific discovery and its translation to clinical practice, according to its website. CNS Fellowship Awards are meant to defer some of the costs recipients incur during their research and to enhance the education of neurological surgeons at all stages of their careers. As a medical student, Wen has studied factors asso- ciated with neurosurgical outcomes and utilization patterns in a variety of neurosurgical subspecialties. With the CNS/ CNS fellowship, Wen plans an epidemiological study ana- lyzing the factors, specifically racial and socioeconomic, asso- ciated with delayed treatment of Rett syndrome on a national level. His research mentors include William Mack, MD, associate professor of neurological surgery and director of the neurointerventional programs, Arun P. Amar, MD, associate professor of clinical neurological surgery, and director, endovascular services; and Steven Yong Cen, PhD, assistant professor of research neurology.

New award honoring compassionate care is established by USC doctor Etan Chaim Milgrom
By Douglas Morino
The Etz Chaim Tree of Life Award, Award of Compassion- ate Care, made possible thanks to a generous gift from Etan Chaim Milgrom, MD, MS, was presented for the first time during recent commencement ceremonies at the Keck School of Medi- cine of USC.

The annual award will recognize, in perpetuity, a Keck Medicine faculty or staff member who strives to improve the health and lives of patients through compas- sionate care, such as empathy, excellence, respect and charity.

Javadar, a USC alumnus and a clinical professor of family medicine and pediat- rics, has dedicated his career to helping medical students and residents understand the impact of extending empathy toward patients. Milgrom had recent life- saving experience at the Los Angeles Hospi- tal of USC. Grateful for the world-class care he received, Milgrom created this award to honor those who go above and beyond to improve the health and lives of patients by consistently delivering compassionate care.

“While I’m not sure I did like I did, the experience as a patient teaches you how to be a caring and compassionate doctor,” said Milgrom, a physician at the USC Engemann Student Health Center at the University Park Campus. “Physicians should always be working to find ways to make their patients more comfortable in both the diagnostic evaluations and treatments they provide and in sticking by the principles with medical students and residents.”

Milgrom created the award to give compassionate care a name, a face and the recognition it deserves.

The inaugural recipient of the award, Joshua Sapkin, MD, said, “Compassionate care is not something that’s often tangible or given often.”

Sapkin, who earned his doctorate from USC, is an assistant professor of clinical medicine and associate pro- gram director of the internal medicine residency program. He was given the award dur- ing the May 16 commencement at the Galen Center.

“But it’s one of the main reasons we go into our profession and serve as doctors and relationships we build with our patients,” Sapkin said. Said Sapkin was warmly welcomed by Keck School of Medicine Dean Carmen Pulasotto, MD, MBA. Future winners will be chosen by a commit- tee chaired by Milgrom and comprised of faculty, staff, residents and student physi- cians. Award winners will serve on future committees.

“The Etz Chaim Tree of Life Award of Compassionate Care serves as an ideal vehicle for our students to aspire toward as they graduate from the Keck School of Medicine of USC and enter the field of medicine,” said Pulasotto. “Dr. Sapkin has demonstrated throughout his distinguished career the best Keck Medicine of USC has to offer in compassionate, personalized health care. He serves as a shining example of the kind of physician that students should strive to become.”

Sapkin completed his in- ternal medicine residency at LAG’s USC Medical Center and joined the faculty in July 2001. The primary care physician said he sets out to build long-lasting, positive relationships with each of his patients, and works with them as they set their personal health care goals.

“We build relationships with patients and we follow them through the years, sticking by them through thick and thin,” Sapkin said. “We provide emotional support, advice and consultation. But we also need to do more — we need to show them compassion.”

Sapkin said he considers himself an “old school” physician and that the value of true compassion can be overlooked in a world fueled by modern technology.

“We have so much technology these days to diagnose and treat patients, but the ability to connect with a patient and show compassion can never be overvalued,” Sapkin said.

Medical student honored by AAM
Maria de Fatima Reyes of the Keck School of Medicine of USC is among 21 U.S. medical students to receive 2015 Minority Scholars Awards from the American Medical Associa- tion (AMA) Foundation. The program promotes diversity, encourages the elimination of health care disparities and helps alleviate the cost of a medical education. Recipients are chosen from first- or second-year students in historically un- derrepresented ethnic groups in the medical profession.

Reyes is a second-year medical student at the Keck School of Medicine of USC. On an AMA web page profiling the recipients, Reyes is described as being excited to begin her clinical education at Los Angeles County-USC Medical Center and looking forward to helping provide health care for underserved areas in Los Angeles.

Dean Carmen A. Pulasotto, left, joins Etan Chaim Milgrom, right, to present the inaugural award for compassionate care to Joshua Sapkin at the Keck School of Medicine commencement.

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Editor: Les Dunshef
Director, Internal Communications: Virginia Baca
Contributors: Tania Chidha, Cristy Lyht, Hope Hamaschke, Carol Matthew, Douglas Morino, Sara Reeves, Leslie Ridgway, Sherril Snelling and Alison Trinidad

Phone: (213) 442-8200
Fax: (213) 442-8270
Email: hscnews@usc.edu
Web: hscnews.usc.edu | kecknet.usc.edu

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