

## **Joseph W. St. Geme, Jr., M.D., A Giant in Pediatrics**

*He was a star in the sky. He showed us the way. We followed him.*

*And then he went.*

George Emmanouilides, M.D. reflecting on Joseph W. St. Geme, Jr., M.D.

Joseph William St. Geme, Jr. was born to Malvina Pozzo St. Geme and Joseph William St. Geme, Sr. on April 10, 1931 in Los Angeles, California. He gained his first exposure to medicine from his father, who was a pediatrician in private practice and a member of the California Medical Group. He attended Loyola High School in downtown Los Angeles and then matriculated at Stanford University, where he majored in Basic Medical Sciences. While at Stanford, he played defensive back on the football team, earning All Pacific Coast Honorable Mention in 1950 and 1952 and All America Honorable Mention in 1952. He was a member of the "How Boys" and played in the Rose Bowl against the University of Illinois on January 1, 1952.

Following completion of his undergraduate studies, he remained at Stanford for medical school. During medical school, he began to cultivate his interest in laboratory research, studying the relationship between melanin and melanomas. Ultimately this work earned the Borden Undergraduate Research Award (for Stanford medical students) and was published in *Lancet*.<sup>1</sup>

In 1956, he moved to the University of Minnesota for postgraduate medical education, where he completed a rotating internship, a one-year residency in pediatrics, a chief residency in pediatrics, and then a one-year fellowship in neurology, metabolism, and endocrinology. Minnesota was at the heart of pediatrics at the time, with Dr. John Anderson as Chairman and with notable faculty including Lewis Thomas, Lewis Wanamaker, Robert Good, Paul Quie, Elia Ayoub, and Bascom Anthony, among many others. There were impressive colleagues in other departments as well, including Owen Wangensteen, C. Walton Lillihei, Norman Shumway, and Richard Varco in Surgery, Cecil Watson and Wesley Spink in Internal Medicine, and John McKelvey in Obstetrics and Gynecology. Following his fellowship, he spent two years as an Instructor in the Department of Bacteriology. Over this period, he began studies of viral cytopathology and pathogenesis, examining enteroviruses, vaccinia virus, measles virus, mumps virus, and herpes viruses and laying the foundation for his investigative career as a virologist. In 1962 he was promoted to Assistant Professor in the Departments of Pediatrics, Microbiology, and Laboratory Medicine at Minnesota and was appointed Medical Director of the University of Minnesota Medical Center Diagnostic Microbiology Laboratory.

In 1965, at the age of 34 years, he relocated to Southern California to become an Associate Professor of Pediatrics at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) School of Medicine and Chief of Pediatrics at Harbor-UCLA Hospital. A year later, he was promoted to Professor of Pediatrics and Chairman of the Department of Pediatrics at Harbor-UCLA and began steps toward assembling a top-flight academic program. Over his 19 years in a leadership role at Harbor-UCLA between 1965 and 1984, the faculty in pediatrics grew from 3 to 50 and the Department of Pediatrics emerged as a national leader in clinical care, postgraduate education, and research. Among the faculty he recruited to Harbor-UCLA, at least 7 moved on to positions as chair of pediatrics,

including Michael (Spike) Miller (UC Davis), Michael Kaback (UC San Diego), Larry Shapiro (UC San Francisco), David Rimoin (Cedars Sinai-UCLA), Delbert Fisher (Harbor-UCLA), Rosemary Leake (Harbor-UCLA), and Mark Sperling (University of Pittsburgh).

His visibility in the UCLA community grew over time, and in 1977 he was named the Executive Chairman of Pediatrics at UCLA. In this role, he combined his responsibilities as Chairman of Pediatrics at Harbor-UCLA with oversight of the pediatric programs at four additional UCLA sites, including UCLA Hospital, Cedars-Sinai Hospital, Charles Drew Medical Center, and Olive View Medical Center.

In January 1985 he moved to the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center and assumed responsibilities as Dean of the School of Medicine. Over the next 16 months, he used his remarkable recruiting skills to attract 5 new department chairs to the University of Colorado, including Donald Gilden in Neurology, James Shore in Psychiatry, Charles Gibbs in Anesthesiology, Robert Meier in Rehabilitative Medicine, and Karl Pfenninger in Cell Biology. Over the same period, he recruited 3 additional chairs from existing University of Colorado faculty, namely Larry Green in Family Medicine, Jerry Weidel in Orthopedics, and Laz Gershenson in Pathology, increasing the tally of new department leaders to 8.

In August of 1986 he was diagnosed with an idiopathic dilated cardiomyopathy and began a period of medical leave. Two months later, on October 11, 1986, he suffered a cardiac arrest while watching his beloved Stanford football team on television. He was rushed to the emergency room at the University of Colorado Hospital, where resuscitation attempts were unsuccessful and he died. He was attended in the emergency room by Dr. Martin Smilkstein, a former resident of his at Harbor-UCLA Hospital who was an instructor in emergency medicine at the time and who ultimately wrote a eulogy entitled "The Saint" that was published in *Pediatrics*.<sup>2</sup>

During the course of his career, he served in a leadership role with virtually every major organization in academic pediatrics. In particular, he was President of the Association of Medical School Pediatric Department Chairs, President of the American Board of Pediatrics, President of the Western Society for Pediatric Research, and Vice-President of the Society for Pediatric Research. In addition, he was a member of the American Board of Medical Specialties, the Residency Review Committee for Pediatrics, the National Board of Medical Examiners, the Committee on Government Affairs of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Clinical Evaluation Program of the Association of American Medical Colleges. He was also an original member of the Association of Pediatric Program Directors Steering Committee. At the time of his death, he was President-Elect of the American Pediatric Society.

The myriad of influential roles that he assumed reflected his profound leadership abilities and his impressive talents as a consummate academician. As a leader, he stressed that general pediatricians are pediatric specialists and should take pride in their unique clinical skills, that pediatric subspecialty training should include an emphasis on rigorous investigation, that the National Institutes of Health should allocate appropriate funds to support pediatric investigators and pediatric research, that nurse practitioners represent an important resource in facilitating pediatric care, and that pre-hospital emergency medical systems addressing the specific needs of pediatric patients are essential for high quality care for children. As an academician, he received teaching

awards from the medical students at UCLA, the interns and residents at Harbor-UCLA Hospital, and the Western Society for Pediatric Research. He was among the first to hypothesize that mumps virus caused endocardial fibroelastosis (a hypothesis ultimately confirmed by Ni et al.<sup>3</sup>), and he performed fundamental studies characterizing intrauterine mumps infection, the effect of mumps infection on delayed type hypersensitivity, and the determinants of mumps immunity. In addition, he developed effective cultivation techniques for enteroviruses and a variety of herpes viruses, allowing recognition of the specific clinical manifestations of infection with these agents. Later in his career, he led a landmark study that defined risk factors for neonatal bacterial infection following prolonged rupture of membranes.<sup>4</sup> In recognition of his accomplishments, he was elected to the Institute of Medicine in 1985.

Beyond his commitment and his contributions to pediatrics and academic medicine, he felt a sincere responsibility to the community. Along these lines, he was a member of the Board of Directors of the Charles R. Drew Postgraduate Medical School for 15 years and the Board of Directors of Little Company of Mary Hospital (a community hospital in Torrance, California) for 6 years. In addition, he served as Chairman of the Area Health Education Consortium (AHEC) for the Inglewood-Centinel/South Bay Area for two years. Closer to home, he was a trustee of the local homeowners association for three years and was president of the Silver Spur Little League baseball program for two years and the Rolling Hills Junior Football League for three years. All along, his family remained his top priority. At the time of his death, he had shared 32 years of marriage with his wife Monica, raised six children, and greeted four grandchildren to this world (there are now a total of 23).

Following his untimely death, a number of awards were established in his name, highlighting the scope of his efforts and the magnitude of his influence.

1) The Joseph W. St. Geme, Jr. Leadership Award was established by the Federation of Pediatric Organizations (the Ambulatory Pediatric Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Board of Pediatrics, the American Pediatric Society, the Association of Medical School Pediatric Department Chairs, the Association of Pediatric Program Directors, and the Society for Pediatric Research) and honors individuals whose contributions to pediatrics are significant and broad enough to be considered as “creating the future” of the discipline.

2) The Joseph W. St. Geme Jr. Education Award was established by the Western Society for Pediatric Research and is conferred biannually in recognition of outstanding achievement in Pediatric Education.

3) The Joseph W. St. Geme, Jr. Award for Outstanding Research by a Resident was established by the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Colorado School of Medicine.

4) The Joseph W. St. Geme, Jr. Pediatric Resident Research Award was established by the Department of Pediatrics at the UCLA School of Medicine.

5) The Joseph W. St. Geme, Jr. Professorial Chair in Pediatrics was established by the UCLA School of Medicine.

6) The Joseph W. St. Geme, Jr. Research Fund for medical students was established by the UCLA School of Medicine and the University of Colorado School of Medicine.

Joseph W. St. Geme, Jr. M.D. saw the best in people and had an uncanny ability to elevate the performance of everyone around him, always with an eye toward excellence. Among the principles that characterized his personality and his approach to life were respect for others, teamwork, optimism, integrity, planning, humility, and passion.

#### **References**

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*This biography is adapted from "Joseph W. St. Geme, Jr., MD: Optimist, Scholar, Visionary, and Role Model (April 10, 1931-October 11, 1986)," published in Advances in Pediatrics, 2007; 54:3-8 and posted with permission from the publisher.*