

Dynamic People: Dr. Robert Bergamini, The Benevolent Dr. Bob

By Connie Mitchell Jan 22, 2015



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Dr. Robert Bergamini chose pediatric oncology as his medical specialty almost 35 years ago because he knew it was challenging: He saw it as an opportunity to care for sick children and their families, part of "doing the complete job of providing care for the entire family unit," he explains. And while you may assume working with cancer-stricken children would be emotion-ally draining, when asked how he copes, Bergamini pauses and then says simply, "We have fun."

Bergamini, known to his patients as 'Dr. Bob,' has been a driving force behind creating one of the most exuberant clinics in the nation. The Cardinals Kids Cancer Center is the St. Louis Cardinals-themed Mercy Clinic Children's Cancer & Hematology department at Mercy Children's Hospital. In it, Bergamini dances with patients to the ever-present music playing through the halls, encourages his young charges to get a little messy in 'Mudville' ("We

hose it down at the end of the day"), enjoys treats from the concession stand, and looks to the future.

"Most of the kids I see will get better," he says, "and the challenge is to make cancer purely incidental in their lives." The youngsters who receive cancer treatment at the Cardinals Kids Cancer Center are firmly kids first and cancer patients second. Bergamini makes sure they pay attention to schoolwork, too, since "they have to know that they have a future, and they have to look down the road. It's an enormous statement of hope for them."

Parents and siblings are welcome at the center, and Bergamini is sure to address their questions and concerns. "This is an open office, and families are welcome here," he says. "We talk about their fears and make sure they understand what's going on with their family member. It's important that we meet their needs, as well."

When looking at the bright colors and inventive design of the center, it's easy to see why a child would welcome the chance to spend time there instead of in a traditional chemotherapy infusion chair plopped in front of a small TV. "We've taken kids' cancer care to a different level," Bergamini says, adding experts from across the country have visited the site and praised the creative use of space. "They marvel that our administrators let us do what we did here."

But Bergamini feels strongly about more than just the environment he's helped create. As medical director of Mercy's palliative care team, he broadens the concept of minimizing cancer and other serious diseases in patients' lives by emphasizing that palliative is not just end-of-life care. "It's about living well with serious illness."

These days, Bergamini's time is split between patient care and administrative responsibilities related to his oversight of the four-state Mercy palliative care team. "I'm kind of feeling my way, but I'm still having a lot of fun," he says.

Bergamini's colleagues both admire and like him, recognizing his unique gifts to connect with his young patients. "Bob is not just a 'people person,' he's a 'little-people person,'" says Dr. Fred McQueary, president of ambulatory care and chief clinical officer at Mercy. "His ability to relate to and build relationships with children with cancer and their parents is legendary. He has always been the type of person who--no matter how busy he is or how many irons he has in how many fires--when he is with you, you feel like you're the only thing in the universe. He has taken that passion and that ability to connect, to build and participate in many programs aimed at helping our pediatric cancer patients and their families."

McQueary is referring to Bergamini's avocational activities, which land heavily in the realm of fundraising and supporting local children's charities. An avid cook with a thriving greenhouse full of healthy produce year-round, the doctor and his wife enjoy offering gourmet meals at their home as charitable auction items that both benefit the causes they support and allow them to enjoy entertaining. The couple's five grown children also keep their home busy with comings and goings.

"My message for my patients and for anyone facing serious illness is that there's nothing worth being scared of. You have to deal with what you have and not let your circumstances defeat you," he says. "My goal is to never let cancer define a child, and it's what I've always tried to do."

