



Ruben L. Velez, MD

135th president of Dallas County Medical Society

Family is key to Ruben Velez, MD. If he had an extra day in the week, he'd spend it with family. His hobbies? Spending time with family and grandchildren. Any time that's unspoken for is spent with his family.

So, in addition to his wife, brother, three children, and five grandchildren, it's fortunate that Dr. Velez considers his dialysis patients as family.

He sees patients every day, mostly as outpatients and in dialysis clinics. Helping patients and having a relationship with them fuels his love of his work.

"Dialysis patients become my family," he says. "Where else in medicine do you have contact with your patients on a weekly basis?"

Dr. Velez was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, graduated from the University of Puerto Rico, and earned his medical degree at the University of Puerto Rico School of Medicine in San Juan in 1978. During medical school, nephrology wasn't first on his list.

"I disliked nephrology with a passion!" he says. "But as a resident, I had wonderful mentors who made me love what I do and find that passion for a subspecialty that is not so attractive as others."

After his internship and residency at Methodist Dallas Medical Center, he completed two nephrology fellowships at UT Southwestern, and became board certified in internal medicine and nephrology. His long association with

Dallas Nephrology Associates began in 1980 as a fellow, when he moonlighted for DNA and rotated with several of the senior partners.

"It was the best experience of my life," he says. "I had the opportunity in a unique private practice to be involved with teaching, research, transplantation, and other areas. I had multiple offers when I finished my training at UTSW, all paying better than what I was offered at DNA. But the job and opportunities were unique with DNA. I would not change my decision, even now."

Dr. Velez joined DNA in 1983 and served as its president and CEO from 2000 to 2016. ("I never wanted to be president. I just wanted to take care of patients," he says.) With 86 physicians and more being hired, DNA is one of the two largest nephrology groups in the country. DNA has long supported DCMS and had 100 percent membership; its leadership recognizes the importance of promoting organized medicine.

Rather than list Dr. Velez' membership associations and his leadership roles with them, it may be more succinct to say that if an organization has the word "renal" or "transplant" in its name, Dr. Velez has served in a key role. In addition to the American College of Physicians, Texas Society of Internal Medicine, and the Dallas Academy of Internal Medicine, Dr. Velez is involved in the Texas Transplant Society, American Society of Transplant Physicians, International Society of

Transplantation, and American and international societies of nephrology. He is past chair of the ESRD Network 14 Medical Review Board, which oversees all dialysis facilities in the state of Texas, and remains on its board. He has served as the nephrology representative on the Texas Carrier Advisory Committee, president of the Renal Physicians Association, and on the boards of the National Kidney Foundation of North Texas and the National Kidney Foundation. He's been president of the Renal Disease Research Institute since 2015 and an investigator beginning in 2017. And yes, this was being succinct.

At Methodist Hospitals of Dallas and at Methodist Dallas Medical Center, suffice it to say that Dr. Velez has served and continues to serve in top spots on the board of trustees, board of directors and medical staff.

He was elected to the DCMS board of directors in 2014.

"On our board, he has a calmness and style of leadership that you want to have in the boardroom," according to Michael Darrouzet, DCMS CEO/EVP.

Instilling values

Dr. Velez is the first of two children; his brother is four years younger. "We had wonderful parents," he says, and credits them for his work ethic and morals. "My father taught me hard work and honesty."

His father still lives in Puerto Rico, where he is an engineer and worked in

construction, at times working several jobs.

"I would spend some weekends with him at his projects just to be with him as I rarely saw him during the week," Dr. Velez recalls. "He was number 13 of 14 children, but he went to college. We were not wealthy, but we never missed anything and we had a good education. My mother was in charge of the household. And when I say 'in charge,' she truly was. She was a strong woman and great mother and protector." She died from breast cancer about 10 years ago.

Becoming a physician

With such an upbringing, it was no surprise that Dr. Velez would be a good student and a hard worker. But a physician? No one in his family was a physician. Everyone thought he would follow his father and be an engineer. But Dr. Velez always liked to help people. In high school and his early college years, he realized that he wanted to be a physician.

Ironically, his wife, Melissa, comes from a family of physicians. "Everyone in her family was a physician," Dr. Velez says. "She made a promise that she would never marry one. I am so happy that I made her break her promise!"

Dr. Velez was 24 when he came to the United States, referring to himself as "an innocent." He and Melissa met in college and wed in May 1978. They moved into an apartment in North Dallas that June.

The couple's son and two daughters were born in Dallas, and their five grandchildren will be joined by a sixth this year. His wife works at Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Children as a translator and interpreter. His son, Javier, is a chef; his older daughter, Adriana, is a teacher; and his younger daughter, Karina, is a software and computer engineer. His brother, Raul, also lives in Dallas.

Living his values

DCMS learned of Dr. Velez' kind heart for patients when he volunteered for Project Access Dallas, a program operated by DCMS that provided free medical care to needy patients. The program ran for 12 years and depended on physicians who voluntarily treated patients who otherwise could not receive care. Dr.

Velez volunteered from 2005 to 2012. The entire membership of Dallas Nephrology Associates participated in PAD, and the group remains involved in helping the underserved population.

According to Jim Walton, DO, a leader in the development of PAD, "Ruben became part of the backbone of Project Access Dallas — one of the key specialists to step up and help establish a pathway for unfunded patients to obtain outpatient nephrology consultations and inpatient care."

Years before the advent of Project Access Dallas, Dr. Walton trained as an internal medicine resident under Dr. Velez at Methodist Hospitals of Dallas.

"We became friends and he was very helpful to me, in addition to teaching me a lot about nephrology," Dr. Walton says. "He gave me the opportunity to work as a part-time member of the Dallas nephrology team. I also learned much about chronic disease management and the art of patient care."



Dr. Velez has been a tremendous mentor and leader in medicine in the Dallas area, and I count it a privilege to have worked with him over the last 26 years. Our community owes him a huge debt for his unwavering service.



Jim Walton, DO; DCMS past president, long-time friend

When Dr. Walton went into private practice in Waxahachie, he referred many patients to Dr. Velez for consultations. When Dr. Walton moved to Baylor Health Care System, they again worked together.

"Ruben did a great job helping me take care of my kidney patients," Dr. Walton says. "On numerous occasions, I asked his advice on how to manage patients, and he always was available and helpful."

Helping people who have little or no resources is part of Dr. Velez' makeup. When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in 2005, the Dallas Medical Operations Center contacted DCMS for assistance with evacuees who were en route to Dallas. At same time, Dr. Velez received a call about buses from New Orleans that were filled with people who needed dialysis. So, his path crossed with DCMS again.

Dr. Velez also does medical mission work, especially in Puerto Rico. After

Hurricane Maria devastated the island, he opened his home to colleagues who had evacuated.

Serving as president

As DCMS president, Dr. Velez wants to focus on ways to improve health care but not destroy the good that has been done.

"With all the changes in health care and the uncertainty of the future, I would like to continue to improve access to care in our vulnerable patient population," he says. "The DCMS Board has worked hard to create a community collaborative that brings together the best health care that Dallas can offer to support our vulnerable patients. We call it the Dallas Choice Plan, and we're working with the TMA Board of Trustees and other major county societies in Texas to put the plan into action. We believe it fits well into the goals the state has for the Medicaid 1115 waiver program.

"In addition, I'm very concerned

about the fractionation of health care—in particular, on the physician side. I support the continued protection of the practice of medicine, specifically the independent practitioners and small groups. We need to continue to protect the doctor-patient relationships that have been damaged on many fronts.

"Finally, we need to continue to work as a team among the multiple hospital institutions and physicians in delivering appropriate and timely care to the Dallas community."

According to Mr. Darrouzet, Dr. Velez clearly is one of the most respected physicians in town. "In the communities, in healthcare systems, with hospital system CEOs, and within the nephrology profession, he is tremendously influential. He is regularly asked to serve on boards and committees, and we are fortunate that when our Nominating Committee asked him to serve, he agreed." **DMJ**