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
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."

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’ make up.
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

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.

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

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