The Experience of A Lifetime

It has been quite a journey to go from being an MCV Resident Physician to serving as Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry for over 35 years.

As I prepare to leave the Chair, I find myself reflecting on so many people who have enriched our department and helped our department develop. Residents and students have challenged us; faculty continue to expertly and successfully juggle teaching, research, tough clinical problems and advocacy; and our patients continue to serve as our best teachers.

Our community partners have been fabulous advocates. Their support helps us know that our work is valued and it provides a wonderful antidote to the stigma that we often experience when caring for the mentally ill.

The field of psychiatry has advanced dramatically since my time as a resident. Back then, we had few medications and a very limited selection of psychotherapies. Outcome research studies were very limited. Just think of it! We have witnessed the rise of objective, meaningful scientific research in psychiatric genetics and brain imaging. We now have a standardized diagnostic system and new therapies like TMS, CBT, motivational interviewing, deep brain stimulation, newer medications and collaborative care, which are greatly improving patient outcomes.

As the field has matured, so has our department. We have expanded our faculty from ten to 70 full time faculty, 100 Clinical and Joint Faculty and have so many more wonderful, smart, caring residents and fellows. Our staff is very loyal, hardworking and effective. Our nurses are the best and have national

Dr. Robert Findling Joins Department of Psychiatry as Chairman

For his first few years of medical school, Robert L. Findling, M’87, thought he would become a neurosurgeon. Then he completed a third-year rotation in child psychiatry.

“These were 6- to 8-year-olds that a lot of people had already written off as bad kids,” he says. “I couldn’t believe anyone could do such a thing.”

Findling changed his focus and completed his residency in pediatrics, psychiatry and child and adolescent psychiatry as part of the triple board joint training program at Mount Sinai in New York. He has devoted the last 20 years to helping children and adolescents living with a variety of mental illness, including depression, autism, anxiety, behavioral issues and attention deficit disorder.

He has lead child psychiatric divisions at some of the most respected institutions across the country, including depression, autism, anxiety, behavioral issues and attention deficit disorder.

FINDLING is coming to Richmond from Johns Hopkins, where he currently serves as director of the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, vice chair in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and as the Leonard and Helen R. Stulman professor of child and adolescent psychiatry.

“Bob is a preeminent psychiatrist who has had a powerful influence on early assessment and treatments for mental illnesses that emerge in childhood,” says Peter Buckley, M.D., dean of the School of Medicine. “He has had a stellar career as a physician, and it all began at our institution!”

While Findling enjoyed his time at Hopkins, he is looking forward to new challenges at VCU as he continues his role as both clinician and researcher. His research expertise not only includes pediatric psychopharmacology, but long-term treatment studies, acute efficacy studies and how to conduct successful clinical trials. As chair, he will strive to increase the number of patients served, including the elder population, train greater numbers of competent compassionate clinicians, create new partnerships, strengthen mentorships and expand research.

“I want to give more patients access to world class health care,” he says.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Health, more than 20 percent of youth ages 13 to 18 will experience a severe mental disorder at some point in their lives, and one in five adults cope with mental illness each year.

“I am looking forward to expanding my scope into both adults and the elderly,” Findling says.

Dr. Findling (cont. inside right)
We are working together to increase access to care.

Treating Addiction
by Janet Showalter

Albert Arias, M.D., prefers to take the direct approach when it comes to treating his patients.

“Why put a Band-Aid on something when you should be addressing the big issue?” he says.

That epiphany hit Arias when he was completing a dual residency in psychiatry and family medicine at the University of Connecticut Health Center. Seeing patients for chronic conditions like heart disease and diabetes, he realized much of what he was treating could be traced to behavioral issues, including alcohol use disorder.

“If we send a patient home and they are still drinking, we will just see them back here when the next medical crisis occurs,” he says.

Today, as the Department of Psychiatry’s associate division chair of addictions psychiatry, Arias is collaborating with other departments within the School of Medicine to build programs and staff so that more patients struggling with alcoholism can be served.

“We are working together to increase access to care,” he says.

One way they are meeting that goal is through VCU Health’s MOTIVATE Clinic. Opened in 2017, the clinic provides psychiatric assessment and medication-assisted treatment for patients struggling with addiction. While about 75 percent of patients are treated for opioid addiction, another 20 percent struggle with alcohol abuse. As MOTIVATE’s medical director, Arias is working to increase services for alcohol use disorder patients.

Over the summer, for example, the clinic began working with the transplant team and hepatology specialists at VCU Health to coordinate the care of patients with liver disease. Hepatology physicians now come to MOTIVATE regularly to see patients there.

Education is also a huge part of these collaborations. Abusing alcohol not only increases a person’s risk for liver disease, but also heart attack, stroke and cancer.

“We are building the relationship between doctor and patient,” Arias says.

A former assistant professor of psychiatry at Yale University, Arias joined VCU in June 2018. He teaches psychiatry and addiction medicine to medical students, residents and fellows while continuing his research on developing new pharmacological treatments for substance use disorders.

“It is vital that we build more programs, train the best possible people and conduct in-depth research so that we can provide the best treatments,” he says.

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, about 30 percent of adults in the United States misuse alcohol at some point in their lives.

“I am passionate about sharing what I know so that we can attack this head-on,” Arias says. “Together, we can do more.”
Finding Passion, Taking Action: Why Business Partners Decided to Encourage Giving at Their Workplace  by Eric Peters

Over the course of Keith Middleton’s five years on the MCV Foundation board, he’s learned a lot about the ways our partners at VCU Health impact and save lives every day.

While he’s often been inspired, one recent learning experience took him a step further in understanding why he joined the MCV Foundation board and where his passion for VCU Health lies.

Keith’s discovery began in fall of 2017 when he and his daughter attended the ribbon cutting at the Virginia Treatment Center for Children at the Children’s Hospital of Richmond at VCU’s Brook Road Campus.

Keith was drawn to learning about the pediatric mental health facility because he and his business partner, Rich Reinecke, both have faced mental health challenges in their families. The two subsequently requested a tour, and what they saw and heard left them energized and inspired.

Engaging the Entire Family in Getting Healthy

One of the most striking things they found on their tour was, simply, an extra bed. They learned that there is an extra bed in every room at VTCC so parents can stay with their children during treatment.

The parent, with the child, is part of the solution and part of the treatment,” Keith later explained. “We walked out of one of the rooms and I looked at Rich, who was silent. He was tearing up, and I knew what it was. He had dropped off his middle-school-aged son several years earlier at another facility.”

At that other facility, Rich said that following the intake process, he and his wife walked out of the unit with no clear picture of what would come next and only a short daily window for visiting.

“There has been little pain greater than walking away from the hospital that night knowing that even if I wanted to, I had no way to get back to my son’s side,” he said. “Just the simple concept that VCU Health has put together a treatment program where the parent can be with their child through a very tough situation, it all made sense to us. And we found one thing like this after another. From the building’s architecture to the recreation areas, educational opportunities and various aspects of the program itself, VTCC is an opportunity for the entire family to engage in getting healthy. What a special place.”

Making a Decision to Give, and Inviting Others to Join

At the end of their tour, Keith and Rich were shown the Cameron K. Gallagher Children’s Mental Health Resource Center, which is located just off VTCC’s lobby.

“When we were facing these challenges with our families, we as parents didn’t know where to turn, and we ended up going out of state,” Keith said. “To see this resource center that is fully staffed for every parent and pediatrician to use for getting information and finding guidance through the entire treatment process is phenomenal. There is a place now for parents like us and many others who we’ve talked to over the years to get answers.”

Energized and inspired to contribute, Keith and Rich invited Sandy Lewis, Ed.D., VTCC’s executive director, to speak with their employees at Fahrenheit Advisors. “We need to break down the stigma. We need to share that mental illness is real and that there is a place parents can turn to for help,” Rich said.

In addition, Fahrenheit set up a fund with the MCV Foundation through an initial grant of $25,000 to support the resource center. Keith and Rich also have begun to share information about VTCC in Fahrenheit newsletters and host fundraisers at their office to support the center.

“My challenge to you is to find your story,” Keith said. “What are you passionate about? Everybody has their own passion, so whatever that is for you, do something about it.”

Take the Challenge

If you are passionate about ensuring the best care is available for families, friends and neighbors in Central Virginia, please consider making a gift to the VTCC by calling Lynn Meyer at (804) 827-6279.

Dr. Findling (cont. from cover)

“Mental illness is not as stigmatized as it once was. People of all ages are able to talk about it and ask for help in a way they couldn’t before.”

What hasn’t changed is the children themselves or the issues they face. While social media might make it easier for children to bully, for example, the issue has been around for generations.

“Kids are still kids,” Findling says. “They want to belong. They want to feel a sense of place.”

Findling has concentrated much of his research in the area of pediatric psychopharmacology in an effort to improve treatment options by discovering more fully how the body metabolizes different drugs, what works best and what is safest.

“The kids we are treating are often at the most vulnerable stage of their lives,” he says. “The idea that we can help them get back on track is incredibly rewarding. It is an absolute privilege.”
Thanks to fundraising efforts by the Virginia Treatment Center for Children Advisory Council, a new butterfly bench is available for patients and their families in the outpatient courtyard of the Virginia Treatment Center for Children. This spring the bench was dedicated to honor Martha Estes Grover (L) and Eva Hardy (R) to thank them for their tireless service for helping to raise awareness about children’s mental health and the VTCC. “We are so fortunate to have Martha and Eva as community ambassadors for the VTCC,” said Alexandria Lewis, Executive Director for the VTCC. “Their passion for helping children does not go unnoticed and this bench is fitting tribute. I cannot thank the VTCC Advisory Council enough for their generosity.” MM