

AN INTERVIEW WITH Dr. Susan Vadaparampil

Susan Vadaparampil, PhD, MPH, joined Moffitt in 2003 and is a senior member and associate center director of Community Outreach, Engagement, & Equity. She also serves as the co-program director for Moffitt's Behavioral Oncology Post-Doctoral Training Program. Dr. Vadaparampil's research uses a combination of behavioral science, epidemiology, health services and clinical perspectives to understand and improve dissemination and uptake of new cancer prevention and control innovations including genetic testing for hereditary cancer susceptibility and HPV vaccination. Read on as Dr. Vadaparampil describes the restorative power of connecting with others and why she needs more "Moffitt time."

What is your favorite Moffitt memory and why?

My favorite memory is getting the job offer from Moffitt. I was doing my postdoc training at the National Cancer Institute, and my husband and I knew that we wanted to come back to Florida. I emailed Paul Jacobsen and surprisingly he responded despite his busy schedule and invited me to a conference being held by the Society for Behavioral Medicine. We had a chance to meet and chat and he offered me the opportunity to do a field placement. I still remember him sliding the job announcement across the table to me and saying, "You might want to consider applying for this." My husband and I joke I got the job at Moffitt by chaining myself to Paul Jacobsen's desk and not leaving until he gave me a job. I wanted to work here so badly but I didn't dare to think, "It's all just going to work out."

Which book is currently on your nightstand?

I don't have books on my nightstand because I have a one-hour commute and so I listen to audiobooks. I recently finished Sonia Sotomayor's autobiography and I loved it. I found her life relatable because both of our families came to the U.S. from other countries. Her family had to get acclimated, understand the culture, and I saw a lot of that with my own family.

What is your most meaningful possession and why?

A small incense holder is my most prized possession, not so much because of what it is, but because of what it represents. My grandmother lived in India all her life and basically raised my brother and me while my parents came to the U.S. first to get everything set up. She was a very spiritual, religious woman. The incense holder was hers and it centers me to where we came from and how we started. Sometimes I think, "Oh, it's so hard as a mom with three kids," and then I remember that my parents picked up and moved halfway across the world and started over again.

When at Moffitt, where do you go and what do you do when you need to recharge?


I step out into our team work area because I work with the most amazing group of people. They are young, fun and have a great sense of humor. We make each other laugh and provide support. I also go to the break room where I can talk to someone, make a cup of coffee and realize that "nothing is that bad." I thrive on interaction and connection with others.

If you could trade places with one person for the day who would it be and why?

I would love to trade places with my kids for the day. They have grown up with two working parents who they knew were always there but were not always *there*. They've become these cool little people, but they also faced challenges. Putting myself in their shoes would be eye opening about how they got to where they are. Also, they have nice parents and they get stuff, so it seems like it would be a good experience.

What is one fact that people would be surprised to know about you?

I do a fair amount of community work and activities. Some of it is tied to work but a lot of it are other things that I feel called to do, whether it's going out and educating in the community or giving talks to different audiences. Everybody



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sees me here as "this is your role" but I have many other hats that I wear, like everyone else. For example, I'm a mom and have three children. People also may not know that I speak two other languages, our own Indian language and some Spanish. I came to the U.S. not knowing a word of English, and my parents put me in first grade and I learned. Others may be surprised that English wasn't my first language.

What advice do you treasure and why?

Ruth Bader Ginsburg said, "Fight for the things you care about but do it in a way that will lead others to join you." There are so many ways to lead and I've never had to be untrue to the way I am. I like to work with other people, laughing and being nice. I don't like drama and competition. I'm happy to be at a place where I can be me, authentic and true to the things

that I care about. That quote exemplifies the way that I try to approach things. It's never about, "Let me tell you what to do," but instead "Let's do it together."

As a woman researcher, if you had a magic wand, and could change one thing at Moffitt what would that be?

I would change time. I wish there were more hours in the day because it's such an amazing place to work and there are all these people accomplishing phenomenal things. We run so fast because everybody is very driven and mission oriented but, as a result, I sometimes don't get to stop and be like, "Wow, my colleague just did this amazing thing." If there were an extra two Moffitt hours in a day, I would use that time to marvel.