MENTOR & MENTEE: NOW BOTH NCORP PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS

The NCORP Annual Meeting is an opportunity for NCORP staff to share updates and research advances – but it is also a chance to connect with colleagues and friends, as was the case this year for Missak Haigentz, Jr., MD, principal investigator of the new NCORP site Atlantic Health Cancer Consortium, and his longtime mentor and colleague Joseph Sparano, MD, principal investigator of Montefiore Minority Underserved NCORP and Vice Chair of ECOG-ACRIN Cancer Research Group. Learn more below from Dr. Haigentz about how Dr. Sparano helped shape his career.

How did you and Dr. Sparano meet and begin working together?

I met Dr. Sparano when I was interviewing for my first faculty position at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, straight out of fellowship. As part of my interview day he took me on a tour of the hospital and I remember distinctly, as we were walking the oncology floor, we stopped to talk to a fellow and he introduced me as “your new attending.”

Soon afterward, in 2001, I applied to present at the very first ECOG-ACRIN Young Investigator Symposium, which Joe founded. I really valued that experience, and it has been tremendous to watch nearly a generation of early-career researchers benefit from the opportunity to share their work in a national venue, gaining confidence and improving their presentation skills.

I became a head and neck medical oncologist – very different from Joe’s interest in breast oncology – but we share a passion for clinical research. He identified that in me early on and provided me many opportunities to shine, both within and outside of Einstein. I am extremely grateful for that. In 2004, he helped me get my first investigator-initiated clinical trial through the NCI’s Cancer Therapy Evaluation Program (CTEP). I secured an ASCO Career Development Award with Joe as one of my referees. He also introduced me to Dr. Arlene Forastiere, who was chair of the EA Head and Neck Core Committee at that time.

In what ways has Dr. Sparano has influenced your career?

In addition to giving me opportunities and encouragement, his example has been one of a remarkably hardworking researcher. I think about the TAILORx study. I was around when he created the name in 2004. To see that trial from inception to completion, over a span of 14–15 years, is an incredible example of patience, dedication, and passion for clinical research. Joe always has set a standard for excellence and quality in his work that I admire. In many ways he has shaped me to be the investigator I am today.

In 2017, I moved from Einstein to Atlantic Health in New Jersey, where I live. I was familiar with the NCORP through Einstein and Montefiore, and I knew participation would help bring a more academic level of care to my community and increase access to clinical trials. To be able to walk in Joe’s footsteps as a principal investigator of my own NCORP site is an honor and a great responsibility because I know the attention he gives to everything he does.

How do you hope participation in the NCORP network will impact your site and your community?

We are very excited to be building something new in our community: a research consortium of oncologists who will work as a team to prioritize and enroll patients in clinical trials. We are the first and only NCORP consortium based in New Jersey, and our six centers cover 73% of the state’s population. Overall, Atlantic Health is increasing the NCORP catchment area by 6.5 million people.

Beyond helping improve the quality of cancer treatment our patients receive, NCORP participation will also allow us to contribute to cancer prevention, cancer control, and cancer care delivery research. These areas, though somewhat outside our comfort zone as medical oncologists, are critically important.