

## POLIO: Forgotten But Not Gone

### The Personal Experience of Polio

When Alan Blum, MD, was in the second grade, he was among the 1.8 million children who participated in the clinical trial of the poliomyelitis vaccine introduced by Dr. Jonas Salk in 1955. “Polio was a very frightening disease, and we were all excited about getting the vaccine,” recalls Dr. Blum, who is the Gerald Leon Wallace, MD Endowed Chair in Family Medicine in the College of Community Health Sciences at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa. He was the inaugural speaker at the annual Carlos Vallbona Lecture Series, hosted by TIRR Memorial Hermann in October 2018.

In 2017, Dr. Blum donated two of his private collections to TIRR Memorial Hermann, where they are housed in the library. “The Personal Experience of Disability Collection” is an archive of about 200 newspaper and journal articles recording the experience of overcoming disability by people with loss of vision or hearing, paralysis, short stature, congenital problems, cerebral palsy and burn patients, as well as physicians with disabilities. The archive is dedicated to Lex Frieden, director of the Independent Living Research Utilization (ILRU) program at TIRR Memorial Hermann and a professor of biomedical informatics at McGovern Medical School at UTHealth.

Dr. Blum dedicated the second collection, “Polio: Forgotten But Not Gone,” to Carlos Vallbona, MD, architect of the Harris Health System in Houston. Born in Spain, Dr. Vallbona came to the United States in the 1950s during the raging polio epidemic and practiced at the Texas Institute for Rehabilitation and Research, now TIRR Memorial Hermann. At TIRR he cared for polio patients and later became a leading expert on post-polio syndrome and the neurological problems former patients develop decades after recovering from polio. He taught at Baylor College of

Medicine for more than 50 years.

The collection was inspired by Dr. Blum’s father, a general practitioner, and his mother, who had worked for the Infantile Paralysis Foundation. “It contains published literature, photos and personal stories, creating a significant history of the war on polio,” says Dr. Blum, who served on the faculty of the department of Family and Community Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine from 1987 to 1999, during which time he worked with Dr. Vallbona.

The donation came about when a friend of Dr. Blum’s, Eric Solberg, who is executive vice president of academic and research affairs at The University of Texas Health Science Center (UTHealth) at Houston, suggested that he contact Frieden. Brenda Eames, MLIS, librarian at TIRR Memorial Hermann, found the collection to be of great historical interest.

Eames is in the process of cataloging it online to make it available to historians, students and researchers interested in the history of polio and the lives of people who lived it. “It’s a treasure trove for people who want to know more about the history of the disease, treatment and outcomes,” she says. “We won’t necessarily be able to digitize everything because of copyright issues, but much of it will be available online. Those who are interested may also come to our library in the TIRR Memorial Hermann Research Center.”

Researchers at other institutions may email Eames at [tirr.library@memorialhermann.org](mailto:tirr.library@memorialhermann.org) for more information. To view the collection online, go to <http://opac.libraryworld.com/opac/signin?libraryname=TIRR> and search “Polio Archive,” “Personal Experience of Disability” or “Blum” under All Words Search.



Dr. Blum with family members of Dr. Vallbona and TIRR Memorial Hermann staff.



# T I R R M E M O R I A L H E R M A N N JOURNAL

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## The Tiniest Strengths for the Greatest Purposes: Achieving Remarkable Results in Rehabilitation

"Man uses the tiniest strengths for the greatest purposes." These are the words of William A. Spencer, MD, founder of the Texas Institute for Rehabilitation and Research, known today as TIRR Memorial Hermann, and they embody the spirit of the rehabilitation hospital's employees and affiliated physicians as they work to change lives by improving outcomes and maximizing independence for people with disabling injury or illness. That simple sentence is inscribed at the base of an uplifting statue, *Prometheus Unbound*, which stands at the hospital's entrance.

As TIRR Memorial Hermann prepares to celebrate its 60th anniversary, the hospital ranks as the best in the southern half of the United States, according to *U.S. News & World Report's* annual listing of Best Hospitals for Rehabilitation. The hospital has ranked among the top five in the country in all but three years since the magazine began publishing the list 29 years ago in 1990.

### Clinical Excellence

"Our pioneering work for our patients stems from our comprehensive approach



**GERARD FRANCISCO, MD**  
Chief Medical Officer  
TIRR Memorial Hermann  
Professor and Chair, Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation  
McGovern Medical School at UTHHealth

to rehabilitation, the pillars of our system includes clinical care, research, education and advocacy," says **Gerard Francisco, MD**, chief medical officer at TIRR Memorial



The words of TIRR Memorial Hermann's founding physician, Dr. William Spencer, inscribed at the base of the sculpture *Prometheus Unbound* that stands at the hospital's entrance: "Man uses the tiniest of strengths for the greatest purposes."

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**TIRR**  
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