

Remembering Dr. Giovana R. Thomas

The University of Miami Miller School of Medicine and its Department of Otolaryngology mourns the passing of Giovana R. Thomas, M.D., FACS on February 23, 2023. Dr Thomas was a tenured professor in the Department of Otolaryngology's Division of Head & Neck Surgery.



Giovana R. Thomas, M.D., FACS

Dr. Thomas was a beloved and highly respected member of the UHealth family who showed incredible courage, strength, and persistence in her two-year battle with cancer, while striving all the while to continue her remarkable level of excellent care and deep concern for her own cancer patients. She is survived by her loving family, including her husband Damone, their two sons, Christian and Sebastian, and her four sisters.

Dr. Thomas was an internationally renowned head and neck surgical oncologist who was committed to excellence in patient care, research, and teaching. She was a member of the Head and Neck Site Disease Group at the National Cancer Institute (NCI)-designated Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center (SCCC) and served as acting chief of the otolaryngology clinical service at the Deerfield, Florida satellite of the SCCC.

As demonstrated below, her accomplishments were lengthy and impressive, but she was so much more than a spectacular list of achievements. Dr. Thomas was an inspiring and successful mentor, with a kind and respectful demeanor that at times belied her fierce determination. She was remarkably patient and a skilled listener, who embodied a respect for diverse ideas and opinions while never acquiescing to the status quo when change was both beneficial and necessary. She was beloved by all who interacted with her and will be sorely missed.

Her Path to The University of Miami Miller School of Medicine

One of five sisters originally from Panama, she emigrated with her family to the United States and pursued her undergraduate training in New York and her medical degree at the University of Rochester School of Medicine. After completing her otolaryngology-head & neck surgery residency at Georgetown, she pursued a rigorous two-year clinical/research fellowship in Head & Neck Oncologic Surgery at the University of Michigan School of Medicine followed by a year of training as senior laryngology fellow at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the Voice and Speech section of the National Institute of Deafness and other Communication Disorders (NIDCD). Beginning concurrently with her laryngology fellowship year she was also awarded a prestigious laboratory research fellowship in head and neck tumor immunology at the NIDCD, continuing this work for five years. While at the NIH, she received the Clinical Center Director's Award for Clinical Excellence. In 2000, she joined the UM Miller School of Medicine Department of Otolaryngology faculty with a goal of pursuing a surgeon-scientist career path, and was awarded an NIH KO8 mentored training grant, among a number of other grants.

Outstanding Research Achievements in Head & Neck Care.

Dr. Thomas made numerous noteworthy contributions to the Department of Otolaryngology, as well as to the advancement of the field of head and neck oncology. One of her noteworthy contributions to the research literature was the description of a novel mechanism of regulation of

an immune molecule, CD80, in head and neck carcinomas. Her research endeavors were brought to fruition with support from competitive grants from NIH, American Cancer Society, the Wendy Will Case Cancer Foundation, and internal grants at UM. While her early work involved primarily laboratory-based studies of head and neck tumor immunology, her eventual career path at UM became focused on clinical trials and the emerging minimally invasive technology of transoral robotic surgery as an innovative technology changing treatment paradigms for oropharyngeal human papilloma virus (HPV) associated squamous cell carcinomas. In 2014, Dr. Thomas was invited to be one of the principal investigators of the prospective multi-institutional clinical research trial ECOG3311. Under Dr. Thomas' leadership a significant number of patients were recruited to this trial from the UM Miller School of Medicine and the Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, with the results of this multi-institutional trial ultimately establishing new guidelines for the use of minimally invasive transoral surgery followed by risk-adjusted adjuvant therapy for patients with HPV related oropharynx cancers. In May 2016, Dr. Thomas was awarded the Mosher Award from the premiere otolaryngology scholar senior association, the Triological (aka Laryngological, Rhinological, Otological) Society. This is the highest honor the Society awards for her thesis submission entitled "Human Papilloma Virus-related Oropharyngeal Cancer in the Hispanic Population" which was designed to improve awareness of the distinct clinical features of Hispanic patients presenting with this disease. Dr. Thomas' expertise was further recognized by her subsequent invitation to sit on the Triological Society Thesis Committee.

Dr. Thomas authored or co-authored numerous journal publications, book chapters and abstracts in collaboration with senior colleagues and while mentoring residents, fellows and medical students. Because of her expertise in the field and experience in conducting high level research studies, Dr. Thomas was invited to peer review manuscripts for many prestigious otolaryngology and cancer journals such as The Laryngoscope, Head & Neck Journal, Archives of Otolaryngology, International Journal of Experimental Pathology, and Clinical Cancer Research to name a few.

Excellence and Leadership in Clinical Care.

Dr. Thomas specialized in the surgical treatment of patients with benign and malignant tumors of the head and neck, including thyroid and skin cancers. The bulk of her clinical practice was at the Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center where she had established ongoing collaborations with multidisciplinary faculty in the care of patients with head and neck cancer. For this work, she was named "Best Doctor" and "Top Doctor" by her peers for many years.

One of the most exciting areas of her clinical practice was incorporating new technology in the care of head and neck cancer patients. The use of transoral robotic surgery revolutionized the treatment of HPV-related oropharynx cancers. In 2010, she became one of the pioneers to use transoral robotic surgery with the daVinci robotic system in South Florida. Dr. Thomas' robotic expertise was recognized with her being named Director of the Department of Otolaryngology's Program of Excellence in Robotic and Minimally Invasive Surgery, where her leadership focused on postoperative outcomes, educational programs for the residents and fellows in training, and clinical research.

She was an active member in numerous professional organizations, including the American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head & Neck Surgery, the American College of Surgeons, Society of Black Academic Surgeons, National Medical Association, American Head & Neck Society, North American Skull Base Society, and Society of Robotic Surgery where she participated in annual meeting program planning, moderating sessions, and committee work. At the local, national

and international levels, she was invited to give educational and scientific presentations in her areas of clinical expertise, most recently giving presentations in both Spanish and English in Lima, Peru and Havana, Cuba.

Devotion to Training and Education: An Inspirational Role Model/Mentor

Dr. Thomas was integral to the Department of Otolaryngology's training programs at all levels, highly involved in resident and fellow teaching and mentoring, and was a past winner of the W Jarrard Goodwin Faculty Teaching Award in the Department of Otolaryngology. In the first year that the Department established a formal mentorship program for its resident trainees, Dr. Thomas was the most popular mentor selected from among all faculty. She was truly passionate about sharing her expertise and guiding the next generation of head & neck surgeons, as she recently expressed:

“Throughout my professional career, I have been committed to expanding my personal knowledge through research and continued didactic studies and then convey and share this knowledge with residents, fellows, and medical students. Using my unique teaching approach that combines respect for others, positive reinforcement and a hefty dose of patience, I aspire to provide the best clinical education to those under my tutelage and to be a successful mentor in the design and conduct of clinical research.”

And that she certainly did. Not surprisingly, in 2019, she received the high honor of being inducted into the Alpha Omega Alpha medical honor society for leadership in teaching, commitment to professionalism and service to others. Additionally, she was honored as a top influential medical leader in South Florida in 2011 and as a ‘Top Black Educator’ in 2019 by a local social media network.

While Dr. Thomas was an outstanding mentor of her trainees, she was an equally important mentor to many colleagues both here at the Miller School of Medicine, as well as nationally within the Otolaryngology community. Mentoring of women in head and neck surgery was particularly important to her. In nominating Dr. Thomas, for the Margaret F. Butler Outstanding Mentor of Women in Head and Neck Surgery Award, her colleague wrote:

“While her active mentorship for our residents and fellows was tireless, her influence as a role model - the head and neck surgeon who demonstrates excellence in her clinical care, passion for her work, compassion for her patients, excellence in research and teaching, leadership, and, perhaps most importantly, models all of these attributes while prioritizing her family - cannot be overstated. Simply put, Dr. Thomas is the best example of why anyone would be inspired to pursue a career dedicated to the care of the head and neck cancer patient, and why women in particular should feel empowered to pursue this inspiring career choice.”

In addition, Dr. Thomas was proud to serve as the Co-Director of the Fellowship Training Program in Head & Neck Oncologic and Robotic Surgery. Her leadership role in the head and neck fellowship program was impactful and inspiring. This fellowship is certified by the American Head and Neck Society and is one of several highly competitive of such fellowships nationally. With Dr. Thomas' influence, the Department of Otolaryngology has been fortunate to match several of its residents into AHNS fellowship positions across the country over the past several years. The fact that several of these residents were women is a clear testament to Dr. Thomas' active efforts as a mentor and her natural talents as a role model, encouraging each of these residents and actively guiding them in their decision making as they finalized their decisions

to pursue head and neck surgery as a career and have sought to be successful in this pursuit. Dr. Thomas served as a mentor and role model to several outstanding men and women in the head and neck surgery fellowship program at UM who are now in academic positions around the country. Her leadership in this area was recognized by the AHNS with her appointment to the Advanced Training Council of the American Head & Neck Society, the body that oversees the accreditation of AHNS fellowship programs in the United States and Canada.

A Leader in the Advancement of Diversity and Women in Head & Neck Surgery

In addition to being an amazing role model, Dr. Thomas was passionate about disparities in healthcare, and the under-representation of minorities and women in medicine as an important contributing factor in these disparities. Dr. Thomas championed a culture change and sought to improve diversity of the UM faculty body, especially in surgical subspecialties. She strived to effect such diversity at the otolaryngology residency, fellowship and faculty levels in academic medicine locally and nationally, and to combat health care disparities in Black and Latino populations. To increase representation of under-represented minorities (URM) and women in the field of otolaryngology, Dr. Thomas was involved in developing ideas, programs and projects for recruitment at every level of professional development through the Education committee, Women In Surgery committees and multiple diversity committees of the American Academy of Otolaryngology Head and Neck Surgery, the American Head & Neck Society, and most recently, the Society of University Otolaryngologists.

She published in these areas, served as the Diversity Champion of the UM Department of Otolaryngology, and was similarly involved in this arena nationally through her work with the American Head and Neck Society. She was recognized as a Top African-American Healthcare Professional in South Florida by Black Health Magazine. Recognizing the power of social media as a force of change and forum of communication and dissemination of information, Dr. Thomas founded the social media group @BWIO on Instagram, Black Women in Otolaryngology. The group is described as a community of Black Women whose mission is to provide mentorship and improve diversity in the field of otolaryngology. This particular accomplishment came to fruition as Dr. Thomas was proceeding through her challenging course of treatment for her own cancer, yet another testament to her passionate commitment to effect meaningful change within the discipline about which she cared so deeply.

A Lasting Legacy

Dr. Thomas will be remembered for her fierce determination and strength, her numerous accomplishments, her kind, gentle demeanor, her leadership as a mentor and role model, and the warmth and compassion she showed her colleagues and patients throughout her distinguished career. While this career ended far too soon, her impact on the field leaves a lasting and important legacy. This legacy can be measured in part by her numerous and significant accomplishments advancing the field of head and neck surgical oncology in many arenas, but her most profound professional legacy will always be the very personal impact she had on all those with whom she worked, and in the many ways that her life and career has become a model for so many to try and emulate in their own lives and professional practices. Her Department of Otolaryngology family, her own Division of Head and Neck surgeons, the many colleagues locally and nationally with whom she worked, and especially the many trainees whom she mentored, will long feel the loss of such a beautiful soul, wonderful colleague, mentor and friend. Our hearts are with her loving family, the family that always came first as Dr. Thomas' true inspiration for such a life well lived.

