

## Jim Sanchez, MD: The Man Behind the Hospital on Wheels

by: Chona G Fernando, M.D. 1980

Our Mighty Class of 1980 has a Rock Star among us in Jim- an accomplished plastic surgeon, engaging teacher, informative author, compassionate friend and humanitarian visionary. He is also husband to Carmelita Salonga, MD and father to 3 children – Joseph John, Francis John and Joana Camille.

Jim's path to becoming a doctor started from adversity. He was the 7th of 7 children (3 sons and 4 daughters) in the family born to loving parents – a farmer and homemaker in Bataan. Tragedy struck the family when Jim was 13. His mother was diagnosed with laryngeal cancer and received irradiation treatment at public hospitals. He experienced first-hand the hardship of being poor – medical care was inaccessible. His mother developed a twang following irradiation and could not speak clearly. Jim still recalled the hurt he felt when people ridiculed her for her speech impediment. She died 2 years later, when Jim was 15. The pain of witnessing his mother's death instilled in him a deep-seated commitment to ease the burden of illness. This became Jim's inspiration to become a doctor and to help the poor.

Being the youngest, Jim's siblings already had jobs even while he was in high school. His sisters left for the USA and Canada. As is typical of Filipino families, they pooled resources to help Jim graduate from UST with his BS general in 1976 and M.D. in 1980. They reaped maximum dividends from their investment in Jim. They also gifted the Filipinos our Dr. Charity.

Jim completed his general surgery residency at Veteran's Memorial Hospital and his plastic and reconstructive surgery residency at Makati Medical Center. He was top notcher in both his general surgery (#2) and plastic surgery (#1) board exams.

Through one of his specialty rotations at Makati Medical Center, Jim became a volunteer for Operation Smile and served in missions with them. He worked alongside William Magee Jr, M.D. and Dr. Kjar, both internationally renowned plastic surgeons. Recognizing his talent, Dr. Magee offered Jim a chance for further training through their Operation Smile physician participant program. Between 1988 and 1991, Jim did his fellowship in aesthetic, microvascular and craniofacial surgery at Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk.

Jim returned from his USA training and practiced plastic and reconstructive surgery. However, his passion had always been to treat our poorest Kababayans who could not afford medical care, wherever they might be. In 2007, Jim began talking about building his surgical van. He approached classmates, friends and colleagues who positively felt about his project but did not offer him tangible help.

Even more determined than ever, Jim set his plan for his surgical van in motion. Through his affiliation with the SFDM Rotary Club, he received an old container van that they retrofitted as an operating room. The Club paid for the cost of air-conditioning and jetmatic for the water tank. Jim helped pay P800,000 for the cost of the chassis. He spent another



Dr. Juan P. Sanchez, Jr, MD'80

P2.8 million that he privately paid his supplier over 3 years to buy OR lights, 2 OR tables, anesthesia machine, e-cart, electrocautery and suction machines, oxygen tanks, instruments, medicines, surgical supplies, other equipment, etc. The Rotary Club of SFDM's Mobile Surgery Unit a.k.a. MSU was born! Our class fondly called it the Surgivan.



Dr. Jim Sanchez showing off the original DOCS Mobile Surgical Unit in 2007

With not much financial support, Jim performed over 10,000 surgical procedures – cleft lip, hernia, thyroid, benign and malignant soft tissue tumors ranging in size from small to huge – during his almost 200 mission trips with his MSU team. Since 2010, he has been doing 2-4 mission trips monthly. The Surgivan did not receive any grant from the Rotary Club except to coordinate mission, food and accommodation. Jim, his fraternity brothers, friends and relatives helped finance his mission trips. He brought along his office staff; e.g., 2 surgical technicians, 1 circulating assistant, 1 cameraman and 1 driver to assist him during his missions.

The support from our Class came in the form of Balikbayan boxes of supplies and money. I spearheaded all of our class' fundraising campaigns over the years but received lukewarm support because we did not have favorable tax status. Thus, I sought out my regular donors, year- in and year- out. The hurdle of fundraising became less cumbersome after USTMAAA allowed our donations to “pass through” specifically earmarked for Jim's Surgivan. I later found out that Jim did not spend a penny of the funds we raised for his Surgivan over the years. He had a bigger plan!

Fast-forward to 2016...

Our Kababayans' needs outgrew the Surgivan. It also became costly and inefficient to operate. Jim introduced his RP Healthcraft Carrier, a fleet of 6 air-conditioned buses and one 40-foot support container van fully equipped as a modern Hospital on Wheels. Prefabricated tents could connect the buses to create an area that would serve as hospital wards. The fleet could rapidly deploy during disasters of which 10 occur annually devastating 30% or 27 million of our poorest and neediest Kababayans. Jim envisioned the Hospital on Wheels to also be a vehicle for training our future doctors. It is in performing procedures under expert supervision that our residents and fellows become skilled surgeons. He is working to draw from local surgery residency programs. Training the future Hospital on Wheels surgeons and other specialists is one of Jim's priorities to ensure longevity of this project.

Jim's goal is to have the prototype Hospital on Wheels running within the next 2 years. He would launch his 1st 3 buses of this prototype program within the year. His plan is to have a Hospital on Wheels for each of the 17 regions in the Philippines, each one costing P100 M per fleet to construct and an estimated P2 B per year budget to operate. To achieve this, Jim partnered with some congressmen and a senator to write a bill that will be proposed to the Philippine Congress this year. Should the bill pass into law, funds would be allocated for the construction, maintenance and operational cost of the Hospitals on Wheels program. Once law, government agencies; such as, Department of Health, PhilHealth, Department of Social Welfare and Development, Bureau of Internal Revenue, Bureau of Customs, Department of Local Government, Philippine National Police, etc. would be mandated to help and provide special privileges to the program.

Jim is driven to serve our least privileged Kababayans in the most underserved areas of the country. Delivering health care is one of the toughest and most important challenge that get in the way of our Kababayans' ability to thrive. Jim's Hospital on Wheels would be a significant contribution to fixing this problem.

Against all odds, Jim got to the point of where he is now – by himself, through grit, determination and hard work. He was never motivated by personal gain or recognition. He is just your dedicated quiet worker.

We have greatness among us. Jim awakens the humanity in each of us to go beyond ourselves. By his example, we might then be inspired to live up to our own potential for greatness.

MABUHAY KA, JIM!

