

LEADER IN THE CANCER FIGHT, AND SON OF AN ILLEGAL IMMIGRANT

By Jim Dwyer
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A few minutes before Ronald DePinho was to give a speech to his graduating class at Fordham College in the Bronx, he sat with his father in a student lounge. It was May 1977. His father had been in the United States for nearly 40 years. The son was on his way to a career in medicine and research that would bring him to the presidency of the biggest cancer center in the country. It was a time for the father, Alvaro DePinho, to pass along some history.

In 1939, it turned out, the elder Mr. DePinho had made his first home in America in the basement of one of the creaky three-story apartment buildings just outside the gates of the Fordham campus. He had settled in the Bronx after coming to New York as a stowaway, spending 13 days at sea in a cargo container: an illegal immigrant.

On his way to work digging ditches, Mr. DePinho, who had had just a year or two of grade school in rural Portugal, noticed the young scholars heading to classes.

"He lived right across the street with another man in this refugee situation," Dr. DePinho said. "I didn't know this. He talked about seeing these men in ties and white shirts, the dress code back then, walking around the college. His only thought was that he wanted his children to go to college."

Which they did.

The third of the five children of Alvaro and Celeste DePinho, Dr. DePinho, 56, has been visiting New York this week from Houston, where in September he became president of the M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, part of the University of Texas. He is raising money and hiring people to study five cancers in depth, using tools developed only in the last few years. The broad idea is to fill a void in cancer drug development by combining Anderson's research brainpower and newly available technologies with entrepreneurial tactics. "The elements are in place to make a decisive assault," Dr. DePinho said. "We're in a moonshot moment."

In the 1990s, the United States spent 10 years and \$3.6 billion to sequence a single human genome. "Today, that can be done in hours for several thousand dollars," Dr. DePinho said. "One machine can sequence as much today in nine days as the entire U.S. sequencing capacity in 2007."

Other technology has made it possible to manipulate the genes in mice and to replicate cancer's process in the lab. And, in what he says is the most ambitious undertaking in the history of life sciences, the United States is sequencing the genomes of thousands of cancers, a project on which Dr. DePinho's wife, Dr. Lynda Chin, is a leading researcher.

In cancer cells, many of the ordinary mechanisms of cellular reproduction become corrupted. These distortions are closely tied to aging, when the tips of chromosomes change. A group in Dr. DePinho's lab reported last year that it was able to partly reverse the aging process in mice by giving them an enzyme that maintains the chromosome tips.

A fountain of youth for mice proved irresistible to Stephen Colbert, who brought Dr. DePinho onto his television show, "The Colbert Report," for an interview and a scolding.

"What are you going to do with all the old people we're going to have?" Mr. Colbert asked. "Isn't it more cost effective to catapult them into the sea?"

"That would be one scenario," replied Dr. DePinho, who had never heard of Mr. Colbert before being invited on the show. "Another perspective to have would be that you could reverse the aging process and increase the years of healthy living."

Following Dr. DePinho, his wife and their three children to Houston are 55 scientists he recruited from the Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center, where he had been director of the Belfer Institute for Applied Cancer Science. This week, he said, he would be dining with at least one major New York scientist he hoped to bring to Texas.

His own career, as a researcher and a clinician, took a sharp turn in 1998, when he moved to Harvard. It wasn't the new address. That year, Alvaro DePinho, who shed his status as an illegal immigrant by enlisting in the United States Army in World War II, died of colon cancer.

"I had just gotten recognition for all these fancy schmancy papers, and I couldn't do anything for this person I loved," Dr. DePinho said. "I vowed that it wasn't just about doing science. It was about making sure that those scientific discoveries drove to things that would actually help patients."