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HC alum's humanity follows him to the lab

By Jean Chemnick SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

WASHINGTON— Anthony S. Fauci credits his Jesuit education with teaching him social responsibility. His education at the College of the Holy Cross, where he was in the classics-based Greek pre-med program, and earlier at a Jesuit high school in his native New York, emphasized philosophy, languages and ethics over the sciences.

"I loved it," said Dr. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases of the National Institutes of Health for more than 20 years.

And he had aptitude for a number of disciplines. Alfred Desautels, who was a professor of French at Holy Cross for 41 years, remembers Dr. Fauci as one of the two best students he ever taught, according to Holy Cross president Michael C. McFarland.

"I particularly like the idea of discovery and problem solving, and that intellectual philosophy that goes along with science," Dr. Fauci said.

He chose medicine over "hard science" because he was guided as much by the fact that he was a "people person" as by his aptitude for science.

Dr. Fauci is now a science administrator and lab director, as well as a policy adviser to the highest echelons of the U.S. government on such topics as AIDS, bioterrorism defense and flu. If the much

discussed bird flu becomes a global pandemic, he will be one of the top advisers to the president.

However, he continues to see patients in the institute's clinic twice a week, a commitment that is all but unheard of among directors of the NIH institutes.

"Every institute director says they do some [patient care]," said Samuel Broder, former director of the National Cancer Institute, "but it's ceremonial." He said Dr. Fauci was the only institute director who still dons a white coat and treats patients on a regular basis.

"My fundamental identity is as a physician," Dr. Fauci said. "I cannot not see patients." His continued involvement with patients also makes him a better medical administrator, he said, and keeps him in touch with reality.

Not that his demanding schedule leaves much time for patients. As institute director, Dr. Fauci must oversee and advocate for research on a broad spectrum of health issues. A typical week will find him talking to Tim Russert on "Meet the Press," for example, or speaking to National Public Radio's "Talk of the Nation" on its "Science Friday" show.

Perhaps because of his background in the humanities, Dr. Fauci is regarded as a good communicator by his colleagues and friends. They say he is exceptionally good at explaining complex ideas— the differences between bird flu and seasonal flu, for example, or the need for long-term preparedness for cyclical epidemics of influenza — in terms that are easy to understand.

Charles A. Dinarello, who worked with Dr. Fauci at the institute and is now a professor of medicine at the University of Colorado, calls him "a layman's spokesman." Whether he is speaking about HIV or pandemic flu, said Dr. Dinarello, Dr. Fauci can talk at the public's level, offering "knowledge without fear."

Dr. Broder echoed Dr. Dinarello's praise, noting that Dr. Fauci does not talk down to the public, and that people sense they can trust him.

As the institute's director, Dr. Fauci oversees many projects, but his own lab work is focused on AIDS. He has been an AIDS researcher since the disease was nothing more than a puzzling group of symptoms showing up in gay men from major U.S. cities.

In 1981, Dr. Fauci was researching the immune system at the institute, studying autoimmune diseases such as lupus and vasculitis. In June of that year, he read about the first few cases of what would be called HIV in a report put out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. By July, it was clear there were enough cases that the disease was not a fluke.

"That was the turning point of my career, if not my life," said Dr. Fauci. He stopped his former research, to the dismay of many of his colleagues, and his lab began to focus solely on HIV.

It continues to be the focus of his lab work to this day. For the 21 years since HIV was discovered, Dr. Fauci has been studying the mechanisms by which the virus destroys the immune system, hoping to find a way to stop it.

Dr. Fauci called finding a vaccine for HIV "one of the most difficult scientific problems." He said that the best vaccine is a small dose of the infection itself, which the body then fights off and "remembers," storing antibodies that make it resistant the next time it meets that virus.

That idea of a vaccine assumes a majority of people can spontaneously recover from the disease in question. No one has ever spontaneously recovered from HIV.

Dr. Fauci said that is why his lab is working to understand what makes the body incapable of fighting HIV. Until that is found, there will be no vaccine.

The frenetic pace of Dr. Fauci's work has its trade-offs.

"I don't sleep very much," he said. He works "outlandish hours," going to work at 6:30 a.m. and often staying until 10 or 11 p.m., six days a week.

When his three daughters, who are now teenagers, got old enough, the family made it a point to start eating together at 9:30 every night, a practice Dr. Fauci described as "not particularly healthy," but which allowed him to finally have a nightly dinner with his family. Lunch can be a tiny carton of Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia ice cream between meetings.

"We've kind of gotten used to it over the years," said Dr. Fauci's wife, Christine Grady, a medical ethicist at the National Institutes of Health. She works full time as well, and the family had a live-in babysitter for many years, she said.

Drs. Fauci and Grady met when a patient of Dr. Fauci's needed a Brazilian Portuguese translator and Dr. Grady, who had spent time working in Brazil, spoke the language. A few weeks later, Dr. Grady was walking down the hall and Dr. Fauci asked her to see him in his office before she left for the day. She thought it was about the patient. Instead, he asked her out to dinner.

Rev. McFarland said the aim of Holy Cross was to create "men and women for others" through an emphasis on public service, and he thought Dr. Fauci's career was a reflection of that unofficial motto.