Paulette McCormick has a vision. Today, the University at Albany’s Gen*NY*Sis Center for Excellence in Cancer Genomics conducts basic research on such topics as why some cancer cells grow out of control, while others go to sleep for 10, 20 or 30 years. Down the road, however, “our long-term goal is to become a comprehensive cancer center, of which there are only about 39 in the nation,” said McCormick, who directs the Gen*NY*Sis center. The thinking behind this goal is simple: The Albany area is 150 miles away from the nearest comprehensive cancer center. These centers provide the latest in cancer surgery, have developed new chemotherapy drugs and targeted radiation therapy, and treat patients with a combination of therapies. What that means for local cancer patients is that they may have to travel to Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo, or somewhere else in the country, such as the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, for a second opinion and treatment. M.D. Anderson, Sloan-Kettering, and Dana-Farber were ranked first, second, and fourth among cancer hospitals in U.S. News & World Report’s 2004 “Best Hospitals” guide. (Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore is ranked third.)

The reason you get the best care at a comprehensive cancer center is that they are designing new protocols for treating cancer — and they have a clinical practice. So the doctors are treating patients, but they are also working in the labs,” McCormick said.

A full 85 percent of cancer patients in the U.S. are not treated at these major centers, according to McCormick, who earned her Ph.D. in cell and molecular biology from the University at Albany in 1979 and joined the faculty in 1985. That includes Capital Region residents, unless they seek a second opinion outside of the area and have a health insurance plan that covers treatment elsewhere.

“What happens with many patients is that when their general care practitioner tells them, ‘You have cancer,’ the brain shuts down,” McCormick said. “They just want to do everything the doctor tells them to do. They just want the cancer to go away. Most people don’t get a second opinion, or they don’t have the means to go to a comprehensive care center or the health insurance to pay for it.”

While some do an extensive search on the Internet to find the best hospital to treat a specific type of cancer, others do not.

“In many ways, we are sort of underserved in the Capital Region. It’s not that you receive bad treatment; it’s the fact that there is no real clinical research going on,” McCormick said. “We don’t have a ‘cancer hospital’ in this area.”

The result is that a patient diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, for example, may require a type of surgery that is done only once a month or once every six months in the Albany region.

“If you go to a center like Sloan-Kettering, there will be a whole surgical team and a pancreatic cancer center, where they have done many of these procedures. Everyone on the team has experience in treating pancreatic cancer,” McCormick said.

The new cancer research center at the University at Albany’s East Campus is scheduled to open Oct. 18. The center is committed to research aimed at discovering the genetic origins of cancer needed to find a cure. It will combine research expertise in genomics and biomedical sciences with state-of-the-art technology in a 116,338-square-foot, four-story building.

While the University’s cancer center is for basic research and not treatment, McCormick sees a future in which the center will have all three components necessary to become a 21st-century approach. “This is not your grandparents’ war on cancer. This is a brand new approach.”

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By Greta Petry
Photography: Mark Schmidt
The cancer research team:
From left: Chittibabu Guda, Igor Kuznetsov, Scott Tenenbaum, Paulette McCormick, Julio Aguirre-Ghiso, Thomas Begley and Doug Conklin

Photography: Mark Schmidt

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Making a donation to the UAlbany Gen*NY*Sis Center’s Fund for Memory and Hope is a lasting way to honor a cancer victim or survivor.

Mary Polissina Hanley made the first gift to the campaign—$65,000—more than two years ago in honor of her son, James, who died of brain cancer in 2002. Funds can also be given to support cancer research in a way that is personally meaningful, whether for a loved one or for all cancer victims—and patients, past, present, and future.

The Wall of Memory and Hope, located in the entrance lobby of UAlbany’s new cancer research center building, will display plaques chosen by donors to the center. The first one will be dedicated to James Hanley. Plaques honoring a loved one are available to all donors making gifts of $1,000 or more. Contributions of less than $1,000 are also welcome, according to Paulette J. McCormick, director of the new center.

Those who donate between $100 and $1,000 may list a loved one’s name on an electronic video kiosk in the center’s lobby. The center aims to raise $25 million to complete equipping the new building and supporting cutting-edge research.

Significant donations have already been made this year. In addition to substantial state appropriations to construct the facility, the University has secured federal grants of $7.4 million to support specific research projects. Recent private donations, totaling $673,670, include:

- Watervliet, NY: Vincent A. Anson: $200,000 pledged on a challenge basis, with funds to be used to outfit the Imaging and Histology laboratory. Robb, a former senior vice president and group executive for Medical Systems at General Electric, pioneered much of today’s medical imaging technology.

  Troy Savings Bank Charitable Foundation: $150,000 pledged toward new equipment, and

  The Samuel Waxman Cancer Research Foundation: $220,000 to support the research of cancer center scientist Jolie Aquirre-Ghiso.

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R ichard Roberts, research director for Bioinformatics at New England Biolabs, Inc., of Ipswich, Mass., is a scientific advisory board member at the University’s Center for Functional Genomics. Roberts shared the 1993 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine with Phillip Sharp of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Center for Cancer Research for their discoveries of split genes.

“We are lucky to have the best and brightest minds working here at the center, and my goal, and the goal of everyone involved in this project, is nothing short of finding a cure for cancer. People with cancer, and their family and loved ones, suffer through a traumatic experience, often with tragic consequences. I know the anguish firsthand, and nothing would make me happier than to see this center produce the cure that would spare future generations the pain caused by cancer.

My own personal experience has made me aware of how much more research needs to be carried out to find a cure for cancer. Scientists and researchers are fighting the battle against cancer all over the world, and with the opening of this center, we will be joining this fight for a cure right in our own backyard.”

Joe Bruno Talks About Cancer

Joe Bruno, who entered the field because she was not satisfied with the treatment her mother received as a breast cancer patient in 1974, is raising funds for this...