

SJU ALUM HEADS NATIONAL CANCER INSTITUTE



ANDREW VON ESCHENBACH FELL SHORT AT PHYSICS, BUT THE JESUITS AT SAINT JOSEPH'S DIDN'T GIVE UP. THEY PUSHED HIM TO EXCEL IN OTHER AREAS, AND TODAY HE IS AT THE FOREFRONT OF AMERICA'S FIGHT AGAINST CANCER.

AGREATER

Andrew C. von Eschenbach, M.D., strolls into a conference room adjacent to his office, greets a visitor warmly — “Call me Andy,” he says — settles into a chair and confesses to confusion over whether the first few months of his new job constitute *immersion* or *submersion*.

The puzzlement is understandable. Since being tapped by President Bush late last year to become the 12th director of the National Cancer Institute, Dr. von Eschenbach has been busy acclimating himself to life inside the Beltway, which can be a pretty strange place for a guy who spent the previous 25 years in Houston.

“These first few months have been absolutely hectic,” says the Class of 1963 graduate with a rueful shake of his head. “They’ve been exhilarating, but kind of like white water rafting.”

It’s heady stuff for the personable South Philadelphian, a onetime military officer wannabe, onetime physicist wannabe, and now the President’s point man in the fight against one of the world’s most devastating diseases.

In a recent interview at the National Institutes of Health’s sprawling Maryland campus, Dr. von Eschenbach discussed a number of topics: the influence of the Jesuits; the coexistence of faith and science; the value of teamwork in battling cancer; how living with the ailment changes one’s approach to it; and the transforming experience of a summer spent in the presence of countless school lockers and several cans of paint.

Andy von Eschenbach’s story begins in the late 1950s, as a senior at St. Joseph’s Prep in North Philadelphia. He was one physical examination away from enrolling at West Point; migraine headaches ended those aspirations. Financial constraints shut the door on his second choice, Princeton University. With an interest in physics and an eye on Saint Joseph’s cooperative education program with RCA in Camden, N.J., Dr. von Eschenbach opted to remain with the Jesuits.

His freshman year at the college was a disaster. Dr. von Eschenbach failed calculus, concluded the year with a 1.56 grade point average, and was dumped from both physics and the RCA co-op. “I was in a total shambles at the end of the year,” he says, “without any clear idea of what the hell I was doing with my life.”

Dr. von Eschenbach spent the summer of 1960 in long talks with his father about life and second chances, and in hot, empty hallways throughout the Philadelphia School District, slapping new coats of paint on endless rows of lockers.

“I came to the realization that, ‘Oh, my God, I certainly don’t want to do this the rest of my life,’” he says.

Summer school allowed Dr. von Eschenbach to wipe his failing grades from the books, and he entered sophomore year as a pre-medical major with a new determination. Many — he included — were skeptical of his ability to reach med school, so Dr. von Eschenbach began envisioning a career as a pharmaceutical sales representative.

But a funny thing happened on his way to hawking antibiotics. Not only did Dr. von Eschenbach excel scholastically, he won the confidence of his college mates and was elected president of the sophomore class; this was followed by election to the student body presidency. He graduated from Saint Joseph’s and in 1967 earned his M.D. from Georgetown University Medical School. Residencies in general surgery and urology followed at Pennsylvania Hospital.

“The point of the story is that whatever I’ve learned or has happened to me really began back then,” Dr. von Eschenbach says. “And it began with an opportunity to pursue a path that initially was blocked. But there were people willing to be supportive and give me an opportunity.”

One of those believers was Howard Heim, S.J., who taught physics to Dr. von Eschenbach as a sophomore. The two have kept in touch over the years, and Father Heim recalls his former pupil as an excellent student who was greatly “admired and respected” by his peers and who helped foster cordial relations between students and the administration.

After Georgetown came a teaching post at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and service as a lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy Medical Corps. In 1976, Dr. von Eschenbach accepted a fellowship in urologic oncology at the University of Texas’s world-renowned M.D. Anderson Cancer Center; the following year he was invited to join the faculty.

ST. JOSEPH'S PREP. SENIOR. NORTH PHILADELPHIA.

SAINT JOSEPH'S COLLEGE. FRESHMAN. COOPERATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM WITH RCA IN CAMDEN, N.J.

SAINT JOSEPH'S COLLEGE. SOPHOMORE. PRE-MEDICAL MAJOR. ELECTED CLASS PRESIDENT.

SAINT JOSEPH'S COLLEGE. SENIOR YEAR. ELECTED STUDENT BODY PRESIDENT.

SAINT JOSEPH'S COLLEGE. GRADUATION.

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY MEDICAL SCHOOL. EARNED HIS M.D.

Dr. von Eschenbach spent 25 years at Anderson, working his way up from faculty member to department chair to executive vice president and chief academic officer. He founded the institution's Prostate Cancer Research Program in 1996 — a prescient action, given his own successful battle against the disease just two years ago. Dr. von Eschenbach also fought melanoma in the late 1980s.

"I don't think you have to have cancer to be a compassionate physician, and you don't have to have cancer to be a dedicated researcher or investigator," he says. "But it should give you a sense of urgency. You really understand at a visceral level, not just at an intellectual level, what it means to confront this disease — the fear, the shame, the terror, the toll it's taking."

The opportunity to take the lead in tackling cancer came about thanks in part to the relationships Dr. von Eschenbach nurtured while in Texas. Former President Bush was a staunch Anderson supporter for years, and his son was involved in the center's efforts as Texas's governor. When the younger Bush was running for president, Dr. von Eschenbach offered health policy suggestions and, last December, the call came from the White House.

Dr. von Eschenbach's appointment at NCI drew praise from many leaders in the cancer community who lauded him for being able to listen and build consensus, and for understanding that a multipronged approach is needed if cancer is to be defeated. Shortly after the announcement was made, Marge Foti, the executive director of the American Association for Cancer Research, told the trade newspaper *The Scientist*, "We have found him to be very effective, a strong leader and a good listener."

A conciliatory nature should serve Dr. von Eschenbach well. He is, after all, a surgeon, yet much of the promise presented by science to defeat cancer lies in basic research. That's not to mention the tangled web of politicians, advocates, lobbyists, reporters and scientists with whom he must deal every day.

If history is a guide, Dr. von Eschenbach should have little trouble interacting with the diverse group of stakeholders facing him. Father Heim illustrates that tact and graciousness with a story: It was only after exams had been taken and grades submitted to the Registrar's Office that Dr. von Eschenbach took the priest aside to thank him for the two semesters of physics he had just taught. "I appreciated that he was so judicious and thoughtful," says Heim, who is now retired and living in the Jesuit residence on Saint Joseph's campus.

"The cancer problem can only be solved when we all bring our skills to bear," Dr. von Eschenbach says. "The problem of successfully managing cancer involves the ability to integrate disciplines and the necessity of research to understand the disease. What I really enjoy and hope to bring to this role is to be that facilitator who helps bring the pieces together."

Here Dr. von Eschenbach falls back on his time in Philadelphia, first at the Prep and then the college, where he was pushed to succeed. He exceeded his own limits in ways he never dreamed possible, yet recalls vividly that a larger purpose always was invoked. Nearly 40 years after leaving Hawk Hill, Andy von Eschenbach still remembers printing the letters AMDG — *ad majorem dei Gloriam*, "for the greater glory of God" — on every exam.

"The formative process the Jesuits instilled in me involved the idea of excellence as an individual," he says. "You are called to discover your skills, talents and abilities, and bring them to their full fruition. They expect excellence of you. The element of success is helping people achieve their own individual excellence while working together as a team."

Dr. von Eschenbach would like to see that kind of teamwork spread across the globe. He believes the United States' vast resources and commitment render the curing of cancer this country's "destiny and responsibility" to the rest of the world.

"When you're dealing with the problem of cancer, dealing with patients who are suffering and dying from cancer," he says, "and you have an opportunity to contribute to changing that story, that world, you understand that that work, like the blue book you filled out, begins with putting AMDG on the label. It begins with a recognition that this is God's work, and it is through His greater glory that we reflect Christ's healing presence in the world. Those were the lessons that got instilled in me when I was at Saint Joseph's."

Tom Durso is director of university communications at Saint Joseph's.

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ANDREW C. VON ESCHENBACH, M.D., IS SWORN IN BY
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