



Fearless Faith

Few Vanguard professors have had as broad an impact on students as **Vince Gil '69**, one of VU's most respected and influential faculty members. For the past sixteen years Gil has also been an unsung pioneer in HIV/AIDS prevention in China.

"There is great satisfaction in seeing the fruit of our work there," Gil says. "China has come out of the dark ages in the way it treats HIV/AIDS."

Gil has played a major part in helping to train China's top medical professionals how to diagnose and treat AIDS patients. His teams "were able to capture the attention of the national government and get its support," he says.

From 2003 to 2006, Gil led teams of American doctors and nurses who offered basic and advanced training to hundreds of medical professionals from all over China. They worked in large hospitals and at the request of the Beijing Health Bureau. The presentations amounted to an explosion of knowledge in a country many say was slow to acknowledge the AIDS epidemic.

"It was an enormous challenge," says Gil. "The joy was to see how a university like Vanguard could impact the global situation of HIV/AIDS a hundredfold by training Chinese doctors who carry out that treatment."

David N. Sundwall, MD, executive direc-



tor of the Utah Department of Health and former assistant surgeon general under C. Everett Koop, traveled with Gil three times to China.

"Vince was our 'fearless leader' — energetic, knowledgeable about Chinese culture, expert in human sexuality and unfailingly helpful to each of us on the team," says Sundwall. "He has an uncanny ability to remain positive and composed when dealing with sensitive political and cultural differences. Under Dr. Gil's very able leadership we accomplished what we set out to

do, and paved the way for future collaborations with the Chinese people. In fact, this year the Utah Department of Health signed a formal 'Memorandum of Understanding,' an on-going working relationship with the Sichuan Province of Public Health, with the blessings of senior government officials in both countries, including the U.S. State Department. This wouldn't have been possible without our previous trips to China, led by Vince." Gil's involvement in China is just another

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Gil (left) with the rapid HIV-testing kit whose use he pioneered in China; above, training nurses and doctors in China.

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chapter in an extraordinary life that began in Cuba, where he was born. He was raised in Miami, Florida, and New York, and after a short return to Cuba his family fled Castro's revolution to return to New York City. They arrived there penniless.

"My life was turned upside down, but I learned the value of family and the reality of what life can really be like," Gil says.

As a teenager he attended a small Puerto Rican Assemblies of God church and "my family encountered the Lord in a very real way," he says. As a result he attended Southeastern Bible College and then transferred to VU.

He met his wife Mikki while they were volunteering at Teen Challenge in New York. They were married his senior year. After Vince graduated from VU they both enrolled at UCLA for their master's degrees. Vince would also earn his PhD there. While employed by the federal government's department of Housing and Urban Development, Vince got a call from Russell Spittler, then VU's academic dean, asking him to teach anthropology. Vince nearly dismissed the offer out of hand, not least because it meant taking a 50 percent

pay cut. But prayer convinced him it was the right move.

He immediately pushed into areas of specialty other Christian academics wouldn't touch. Gil's pioneering class on

human sexuality remains one of the most popular offerings at VU. He went back to school and obtained a post-doctorate in human sexuality. When the HIV/AIDS crisis broke out in the 1980s, Gil questioned why the church wasn't getting involved.

"It was initially perceived as a gay disease and the church wouldn't touch it," he says. "But HIV/AIDS was spreading into other populations and affecting especially women."

Gil dived into the problem and began researching how cultural habits in Puerto Rico facilitated the spread of the disease. He then returned to UCLA to be mentored in HIV/AIDS epidemiology and public health.

In 1990 he was invited to join a medical delegation to China through UC San Francisco. The invitation would deeply impact his career.

"Many Western physicians were attempting to work on the blossoming problem in China, but they didn't understand the cultural context," he says. "[As an anthropologist] I had the training to understand the mindset."

Gil was invited back and his work caught the notice of the China Centers for Disease Control. That birthed a unique relationship in which Gil, and his partners at Northwest Medical Teams in Oregon, led teams to teach Chinese doctors, nurses, laboratorians and pharmacists how to diagnose and treat AIDS patients.

"By being persistent with the Chinese, you gain recognition and access," he says. "One of our teams' greatest accomplishments has been gaining the trust of Chinese authorities. That's been monumental."

Gil also forged a partnership with a Canadian company that was developing an HIV-testing kit that could diagnose the disease quickly, with little training and with only a drop of blood. It was one of the first such tests available. Gil's research on the product was later submitted by the company to the FDA when they sought approval. The kit was introduced to China, and was the first rapid test to be deployed there successfully.

Today, partly as a result of the work of Gil's teams, China is much more advanced in its handling of the AIDS crisis.

"I think our work has left an incredible mark," Gil says. One particular hospital, with 1 million outpatients per year, went from no capacity for treating AIDS patients in 2003, to opening a small ward by 2005 because of Gil's teams' efforts.

"Nurses told us, 'You gave us a new model

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