

THE INSPIRATIONAL CAREER OF JIM AUGUSTINE

anatomy of a scholar



Jim Augustine taught his first class at the USC School of Medicine in 1978, far left, and continues teaching today with students including, from left, Alex Wagner, Huu Tran, Adam Brunson and Eric Schmieler.

For neuroanatomy professor Jim Augustine, Ph.D., just about anything can be traced back to the brain — including his own career.

In spring 1966, when Augustine was a sophomore at Millikin University in Decatur, Ill., a pair of professors from Saint Louis University (SLU) medical school showed up on the small Midwestern campus as part of a neuroanatomist recruitment program sponsored by the National Institutes of Health. The professor gave a talk and hosted one-on-one meetings with students who might be interested in careers in the field of human anatomy, especially neuroanatomy, but they also brought along a few props, including an actual human brain, which immediately impressed Augustine.

“You know, I’m from a small town in Illinois, and these distinguished professors came from one of the big medical schools in St. Louis, and they’ve got their white coats and they’ve got this brain,” says Augustine, now in his 37th year at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine. “I was just really bowled over by both of them.”

Augustine still needed to finish his undergraduate degree in biology, of course, but when the visiting professors returned during his senior year — “again with the white coats, again with the brain” — he approached them about entering the master’s program in human anatomy at Saint Louis University medical school. It wasn’t long before the men in white coats were as bowled over by Jim Augustine as Augustine had been by them.

“Jim was very conscientious, hardworking,” says **Paul A. Young, Ph.D.**, one of the two NIH recruiters who visited Millikin almost half a century ago, now professor and chairman emeritus of SLU’s Center for Anatomical Science and Education who still teaches at SLU. “He was a go-getter, never satisfied with a simple answer. He always wanted to go a little deeper and get to the bottom of everything.”

That keen intellectual curiosity served Augustine well as he pursued a doctorate in human anatomy at the University of Alabama at Birmingham medical school, where he was fortunate to work closely with a second mentor, the legendary neuroanatomist **Elizabeth Crosby**. Towards the end of her career, but still early in his own, Augustine co-authored a pair of papers with Crosby, and years later would be named the 2012 Elizabeth Crosby Visiting Professor in the Department of Neurosurgery at the University of Michigan.

“I was always around really good teachers at SLU and UAB,” says Augustine with a shrug that suggests the progression from student to mentor was all but inevitable. “I just felt comfortable in that environment. I wanted to do what they were doing.”

Because the medical school at Alabama was growing rapidly in the early 1970s, Augustine quickly got exactly what he wanted, being asked to teach not just neuroanatomy but gross anatomy, and not just to medical students but to dental students and optometry students. In fact, his extensive classroom experience proved to be a big reason he was

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recruited by USC in 1976 to become a course director at the new medical school — at the ripe old age of 30. “I’d had a great variety of teaching opportunities in the all the disciplines of anatomy — embryology, gross anatomy, histology, and neuroanatomy with medical, dental and optometry students,” he says. “It just seemed like a lot of wonderful opportunities presented themselves and I followed that path. I was about as well prepared to do what I started to do when I came here as I could possibly have been.”

In the years since his arrival at USC, Augustine has sat on more than 72 committees, served as president of the Faculty Senate and most recently provided assistance with faculty concerns or conflicts as the university’s ombudsman, a position he has held since its establishment in 2006. However, according to colleagues, it’s the teaching and writing that truly drive him.

“Whenever we’re discussing our profession, he talks about the students,” says Young, who has remained close to his own former student over the years. “They’re the most important part of his professional life — working with them, watching them mature, watching them learn. That’s what keeps him going.”

With almost four decades at USC now in the grade book, Augustine has taught nearly every one of the approximately 2,500 students to pass through the medical school since its founding. And the fact that he’s racked up his share of teaching awards along the way is no surprise to those who know him best.

“He’s had such a positive impact on our students and on our faculty with respect to work ethic, professional responsibility and a commitment to excellence,” says School of Medicine Dean **Richard Hoppmann, M.D.** “Whenever I run into one of our graduates they almost always ask about Dr. Augustine.”

Professor emeritus of clinical pediatrics **Warren Derrick Jr., M.D.**, is another big fan, having taught alongside Augustine at Alabama and later followed him to Carolina.

“Jim was already an outstanding faculty member in Birmingham, and he’s been an outstanding faculty member here,” Derrick says. “He is extremely analytical and really knows his stuff. He’s one of the best teachers the medical school has had.”

Like any good scholar, Augustine can likewise point to a long list of publications, chief among them his single-author textbook “Human Neuroanatomy,” which came out in 2008 and which Augustine considers the crowning accomplishment of his career not just as a scholar but as an educator.

“The book arose from my interactions with students, and the way they made me think about what I know,” says Augustine, who is currently readying an updated edition. “Constantly being asked questions and being forced to question my own understanding of the nervous system made it a better book. And writing the book made me a better teacher.”

All of which has benefitted the students, among them Columbia neurosurgeon **Sharon Webb, M.D.**, ’02, who sought Augustine out on her very first day on campus. As the first School of Medicine student in nearly fifteen years to pursue a career in neurosurgery, Webb worked closely with Augustine — just as Augustine had once worked closely with Young and Crosby. Fifteen years later, Webb counts Augustine not only as a colleague but a friend.

“He’s had a really big impact on me,” Webb says. “I know in my heart that I wouldn’t be where I am if I hadn’t had his help and his encouragement, his inspiration along the way.” ■