



JENNIFER GEEL

SOUTH AFRICA

Prof. Jennifer Geel is the Head of Paediatric Haematology-Oncology at Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital, former Chair of the South African Ministerial Advisory Committee on Cancer Control and Prevention and current Secretary-General of SIOP Africa.

She is passionate about improving the survival and quality of life of children with cancer in Africa. She spent two years in clinical research settings in Cape Town and London before specialising in paediatrics and subspecialising in paediatric oncology. She has an interest in stem cell transplantation and is the principal investigator of the SA National Hodgkin lymphoma group.

Prof. Geel is an executive committee member of the South African Association of Paediatric Haematology-Oncology. Currently, she is involved in research on various childhood cancers and is a keen mentor of upcoming talent.

She founded a non-profit organisation, CARE (Cancer Awareness, Research and Education) for Kids with Cancer, to fund collaborative research in South Africa and works with teams of committed researchers to increase collaborative research in the region.

***I flow
through life
calmly and
serenely.***

On Relationships that Influenced My Career

My partner, Thandi Lewin, is my biggest supporter and I am where I am today because of her and my family.

People forget what a big deal it is for someone to agree to supervise a post-graduate degree. What supervisors put in compared to what they get out is completely disproportionate. I will never be able to pay back my PhD supervisors for all that they have done for me – their unfailing support inspires me in my own mentoring and supervisory roles, though I do not know if I will ever reach their heights. I met Daynia Ballot in 2003 in the start of my paediatrics training. When I received the news that my father had died in a car accident while we were doing a neonatal grand round, she stopped everything and offered to take me home. I will never forget her tough, no-nonsense genuine kindness which is ongoing. Monika Metzger, my content supervisor, combines an incredible work ethic, a razor-sharp mind and infinite kindness. I consider Monika to be a doyenne of childhood and adolescent Hodgkin lymphoma and I was so very grateful when she agreed to supervise my project. Together, the two of them provided a nurturing space that allowed me to grow in my own time, yet they were always available whenever I needed them, and they did not hold back in their thoughtful critique of my work so that it could be better.

On Challenges and Overcoming Them

The most recent examples that come to mind are the combined challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, a fire at our hospital and loadshedding. Loadshedding is the South African solution to a massively undercapacitated electricity grid, with ongoing electricity shortages both at home and at work. This diabolical combination made it really hard to work on my PhD – I became head of our unit half way through the project, then suddenly COVID-19 happened and a year later a hospital fire forced us to relocate all our patients and files and

set up shop in a new place for a few months. Luckily, I work with really strong teams and we were able to continue to provide a quality clinical service and continue our research, but it was hard. My colleagues, many of whom are also friends, were pragmatic and strategic and we worked well together to plan how to overcome the obstacles. We kept up our routines of regular meetings to discuss patients and issues, celebrated important events, and remembered to laugh and be grateful.

I learned that life throws curve balls, and yet we emerged from the chaos stronger and more accomplished, with new skills. I learned that a hot water bottle with water heated on a gas stove, rechargeable lights, blankets and a puppy at my feet were more than enough to get through the winter early morning data-capture and thesis-writing. I had planned to take a sabbatical but it just never happened with all that was happening, and I owe my team a huge debt of gratitude for carrying the clinical load.

On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

I have yet to achieve work-life balance – it is an ongoing battle and I constantly feel that I could be a better mom, a better doctor and a better partner. I have always included my children in my work as much as possible and they have been enormously helpful in listening to me practice presentations since they were about six years old. They pick up errors, tell me when things do not make sense and give excellent critique on the slides. They take pride in my achievements and I feel that they are a part of my success. I have tried hard to prioritise them and they remind me, quite vocally, when I am not paying them enough attention!

I try to be present for my children when they need me, and love watching them play sports. I remind myself to say “yes” or “why not” instead of an automatic “no.” If I get a chance to go to an awards ceremony or sporting event I take it, even if it is during the day, and make up the time by doing

extra work after hours. My partner and I try to make sure at least one of us is there for all major events – parent-teachers meetings, medical appointments, sporting events, etc. We have a live-in housekeeper-nanny-auntie, Sarah, who makes it all possible. We could not do the work that we do without her.

years ago to try to calm me down: “I flow through life calmly and serenely”. It’s stuck with me, and I’m still trying to achieve it.

My Words of Wisdom for the Next Generation of Female Leaders

If I could talk to my 25-year old self, I’d advise myself to learn diplomacy and tact! I was ridiculously shy as a child and am still very introverted, so I have compensated by creating a façade of strength and confidence. I’m still working on expressing what I feel without being abrasive. I would tell myself that good times are coming, that I will live the most wonderful life full of love and meaning and that I should not worry – I will achieve more than I ever dreamed possible. That vulnerability is a sign of strength.

My advice to people coming into the field is to get to know yourself. Go to therapy if you can possibly afford it and become aware of what makes you tick, why you chose this career and why you respond in certain ways. Much of what we do is influenced by unconscious impulses, and the people we meet, especially the parents and children, are so very fragile at the point when we encounter them for the first time, and at the times when we have to tell that their child has relapsed or will die. Listen more than you talk – counselling is about bringing people gently to a truth that they may have already sensed, not about breaking down their defences or talking at them. Always leave room for a little hope, because without it, people cannot survive. Always be honest with them, and they will be able to trust you. It is a great privilege working with children with cancer, and an even greater privilege to be with a family at the time when their child is dying. It is a hard, emotional, intense job but it is also meaningful and rewarding.

A friend gave me an affirmation more than thirty