

**President Julio Frenk, the former Harvard dean and minister of health for Mexico, has traveled a long and impactful road to UM, arriving full of fresh ideas, shared aspirations, and excitement for the institution's future as a global force.**

# FUTURE FOCUSED

**BY ROBERT C. JONES JR.**  
**PHOTO BY DONNA VICTOR**

The old woman's face was covered in blood. At some point during her three-hour walk to a small village in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, she stumbled and fell, opening a gash on her forehead. But that was the least of her worries. ■ Her seriously ill grandson, whom she'd carried throughout her long trek, would not receive the immediate medical attention he needed because the village's sole health care practitioner was away on an errand, and no one else in town had the medical know-how to help. As she stood with her ailing grandson, her forehead still bleeding, the long journey, it seemed, had been for nothing ■ Watching the scene unfold was 16-year-old Julio Frenk. The son of German-Jewish immigrants who fled to Mexico to escape the persecution of Nazi Germany, Frenk was fascinated by the social sciences. He had come to the village in Chiapas—first by truck over barely passable dirt roads, then, like the old woman, by foot—to observe a famous anthropologist and study the region's indigenous people. ■ Frenk also was searching for an answer: whether he, too, wanted to become an anthropologist or, like three generations of his family before him, practice medicine. The old woman's plight provided the answer he sought. ■ “At that moment, I said to myself, ‘I am not only going to study these people. I am also going to serve these people,’” recalls Frenk. “That was a life-changing moment for me. That’s when I knew I wanted to become a physician.”





And Frenk did just that, earning a medical degree and caring for Mexico's disenfranchised as a physician. He would also ascend to other important positions—stints at the World Health Organization, Mexico's Ministry of Health, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and Harvard, among them. Now, Frenk has stepped into his newest role as the sixth president of the University of Miami, with his inauguration slated for January 29, 2016.

But one thing hasn't changed: he still uses the incident in the Chiapas village as a lesson to illustrate the importance of understanding the root causes of problems. "The child got sick because he was living in awful conditions with no clean water," explains Frenk, "and the grandmother got injured because the roads were in poor condition."

Frenk's entire life has been a blueprint for creating real and lasting change to make the world a better place.

Appointed health minister under Mexico's president Vicente Fox from 2000 to 2006, he introduced comprehensive universal health insurance long before there was Obamacare. Frenk's efforts expanded access to health benefits for tens of millions of uninsured Mexicans, including the impoverished and vulnerable—people like the elderly woman and her grandson Frenk had crossed paths with in the small village in Chiapas (he says the boy and his grandmother received medical care the next day when the health practitioner returned to town).

Undoubtedly the circumstances surrounding his own origins played a role in shaping his mission. Prior to World War II, Frenk's grandparents fled Nazi Germany for Mexico, which, while lacking economic resources, he says, was a nation rich in its tolerance for diversity. "Had my grandparents made a different decision, had they decided to wait it out like so many other Jews in Europe, I would not be here today," says Frenk, who was born in Mexico City in 1953.

Mexico welcomed and embraced Frenk's family. His grandfather, who had been a physician in Hamburg, Germany, helped write social health insurance laws in Mexico, and Frenk's father, Silvestre, championed children's health



Even on the go, President Julio Frenk finds time to stop and chat with UM's No. 1 resource—students.

DONNA VICTOR

as a pediatrician in the country. "He's 92 years old and still goes to work every day," says Frenk.

"That original family that was not wiped out in the Holocaust has produced a very large group of descendants," says Frenk, whose parents still live in Mexico and who has six siblings, including a twin sister. "All of us know that we owe our lives to the generosity of [Mexico], which then became our country. So I was brought up with the idea of the need to give back, almost a moral imperative to understand that sometimes it's the generosity of strangers that actually gives you the chance to live."

Frenk has applied that value set to every challenge he has undertaken—small to monumental.

Long before he went into public health—while taking a physiology course during his first year of medical school—he developed a keen interest in the human body's many functions. But he thought, "No one should have to wait until they are 19 to learn how their body works." That's when he came up with the idea to write a children's book on the topic. Using an old manual typewriter, Frenk created a group of characters based on amino acids, telling a story about their travels throughout the human body.

He put the manuscript in a drawer for three years before trying to publish it. When the first edition hit bookshelves in 1978, it became a best seller and has been in print ever since. It was

# Frenk's First Day

**On his first official day on campus as UM president, Julio Frenk hit the ground running, meeting with student leaders and greeting parents.**

Frantzie Jeannot was standing outside the entrance to the University of Miami's Hecht Residential College when a golf cart rumbled to a stop only a few feet from her.

Jeannot, a first-year student fellow at Hecht, immediately recognized one of the cart's occupants.

"Settling in?" she asked the bespectacled gentleman in the dark suit.

"Yes," he replied. "This is my first day."

And with that, UM's sixth president, Julio Frenk, continued his morning itinerary, walking into the Hecht lobby, accompanied by Vice President for Student Affairs Patricia Whitely, to meet and interact with more students who are part of this new era at the U.

"It's going to be exciting to see what he does for UM," Jeannot said.

Inside Hecht, Frenk greeted parents who were helping their youngsters check into their new living quarters as another academic year got underway.

"Good luck in your new job," one parent shouted to Frenk.

Walking from Hecht to nearby Stanford Residential College, Frenk paused to check out the UM Band of the Hour percussion section practicing on the intramural field.

As he arrived at Stanford, applause broke out from the students working the front desk.

"It's wonderful to see he's so engaging with students," said Donald Dremluk, a parent in town from Alexandria, Virginia, to help his daughter, Kate, a freshman, get settled in.

Earlier in the day at the food court, Frenk had met with about 20 student program coordinators for UM Orientation, which this year was themed Discover the U. Among them was Freddy Michaud, a biomedical engineering major, who was also impressed with Frenk's "inviting personality."

For his last stop of Day One, Frenk met with the U's student leaders at the Scott and Susan Fleischner Kornspan Study Lounge at the Shalala Student Center. He answered questions and spoke candidly, relaying a story about his late grandmother. "One of my many blessings in life is I had a grandmother who lived to be 106," he told them, and she had a collection of "first times." "Even at 100, she was still going to different places." Frenk noted that he too has started his own collection of "first times," which will now include his many experiences and encounters at UM. —Robert C. Jones Jr.



PHOTOS: ANDREW INNERARITY



From top down: President Frenk gets in on a selfie and lends an ear to student leaders at UM's food court and Kornspan Study Lounge.

so successful, in fact, that Frenk started a children's book series about the human body, and from time to time, he meets people who tell him his texts sparked their interest in becoming physicians.

After receiving his medical degree from the National Autonomous University of Mexico, Frenk earned a Master of Public Health, a Master of Arts in sociology, and a joint Ph.D. in medical care organization and sociology from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

When he became dean of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Frenk tackled the problem of worldwide social and gender inequality. Addressing the factors that have led women to increased risks of ill health and injustice within the health sector, he launched the Women

and Health Initiative, aimed at improving outcomes and recognizing the vital roles women play in the household, community, and workforce as health care providers and caregivers. He also presided over a dramatic expansion of the school's international reach, the reimagining of its mission to focus on four global public health challenges, a major revamping of its curricula, and the school's renaming to honor T.H. Chan after Frenk helped steer a historic \$350 million endowment gift by The Morningside Foundation.

Frenk, who took the reins of the UM presidency on August 16, is confident his expertise in public health will be a tremendous benefit in his newest post because the field's "be ready" approach can be applied to many other

areas. "Whether it's how to deal with the complex dynamics on a campus or face the challenges in research funding, almost any problem is amenable to that framework," he explains. "It's a proactive stance as opposed to a reactive stance that simply responds to problems once they happen."

When he was introduced to the South Florida community at a press conference in mid-April, Frenk, 61, cited as one of the key factors in choosing UM, the chance to carry on the "upward trajectory" established by Donna E. Shalala during her 14-year tenure as president.

UM is an institution whose "horizons are indeed bright, with so many opportunities for growth," Frenk says. "I immediately felt this was a university that





“Coach” Frenk addresses the 2015 Hurricanes football squad on Greentree Practice Fields.

had a very internal, very intense drive towards improvement. That’s always exciting for any leader of an organization.”

He counts the U’s age—at 90, one of the youngest of the top research universities—as a benefit, not a burden. “I’m hoping that out of that youth comes a lot of energy,” says Frenk. “Of course, there are great institutions that have been around for much longer. I find that an opportunity to learn and to leapfrog. We don’t need to go through the exact same stages that a Harvard or Cambridge or an Oxford went through. We can find our own pathway by being attentive to that richness of experience.”

And with the institution’s 100th birthday only a decade away, now is the time to prepare for its second century, he adds. “We don’t need to wait. We’re particularly well suited to envision what we want to look like in the 21st century and start building it now.”

For the University of Miami, located in an area regarded as the gateway to Latin America and the Caribbean, that

future undoubtedly holds a greater presence in initiatives and programs that will inform the global discussion on matters affecting this part of the hemisphere. Frenk, the first Hispanic president in UM’s history, says the nation needs a great university with a “southward, eastward, and westward orientation that embraces the entire globe but is very focused on a part of the world that is not always as present as I think it should be in the global discourse.”

The region’s “great innovations” in a number of policy areas could serve as valuable lessons for developed and developing countries, Frenk insists. “Those innovations—in democratic governance, in macroeconomic stability, and in social policy innovation—are hugely important, and we need a university that’s focused on the understanding of the translation of that experience and making it available to the rest of the world—not so that those experiences are adopted but adapted to local realities. The University of Miami

is uniquely suited to play exactly that role,” he continues.

Supporting that role is UM’s rebranded Miami Institute for the Americas, formerly the Center for Latin American Studies, at the College of Arts and Sciences. Focusing on policy analysis in all sectors of the region—from the humanities and arts to social and economic development—the institute is led by Felicia Knaul, an international health economist and expert on Latin American health systems from Harvard who also happens to be President Frenk’s wife.

Frenk and Knaul, who also has a faculty appointment at the Department of Public Health Sciences at the Miller School of Medicine, have a proven track record of working together. During Frenk’s term as Mexico’s minister of health, Knaul assisted his team of economists and health professionals in the financial calculations for establishing the country’s universal health care insurance plan. “More than a challenge, it was an opportunity to put right something that I felt was wrong for so long,” says Knaul, who echoes Frenk’s sentiments that UM is a “gateway to the Americas and a vibrant base for research and educational innovation to promote social, human, and economic development for that region and the world.”

Miami’s wealth of diversity is another key ingredient that drew Frenk, a polyglot fluent in English, Spanish, French, and German, to Miami. Cultural, racial, and religious differences should be celebrated, promoted,



President Frenk and Felicia Knaul, daughters Mariana Havivah and Hannah Sofía, and family pets Tikvot and Lupi roam Ibis House grounds.



**Big-screen impact:** At a packed Town Hall, President Frenk announces his 100-day listening exercise and his January 29 inauguration.

and used as “an antidote to inequality,” he says. “A diversity of perspectives enriches the experiences of everyone. It enriches our outlook and our way of analyzing, understanding, and attacking problems. Diversity is inherently a value we need to promote. It is also a value where the University can play a very important role of serving as a model of the sort of values and behaviors we would like to see reflected in the larger society of which the University is a part.”

Frenk—who moved into Ibis House this summer with Knaul, their daughters Hannah Sofia and Mariana Havivah, and the family’s two dogs, Tikvot and Lupi—is already immersing himself in the UM culture. He served as honorary captain at a Hurricanes football game, greeted brand-new ‘Canes during Move In Day (see sidebar, page 17), welcomed students at the annual ‘Canes Kickoff, and perfected that all-important Hurricanes tradition—throwing up the U.

At his first public event, a Town Hall forum held at the BankUnited Center in

early September, Frenk unveiled several steps toward creating a roadmap to UM’s second century. He outlined one of the forthcoming plan’s major components—a listening exercise in which, over the first 100 days of his presidency, he is meeting with UM community members (some 2,500 so far) and soliciting students, faculty, and staff to share their aspirations for the U via a Web portal (1,160 comments have come in to date).

As a result of what he’s heard, Frenk has identified four objectives for which the University should strive: the pursuit of excellence in academics, service, the arts, athletics, and administration; achieving relevance in helping to solve the world’s most pressing problems; becoming a model for values such as diversity and tolerance; and becoming what he called “a force of integration across the Americas,” or specifically, taking advantage of UM’s geographic location in greater Miami as a gateway to the world. He also took questions posed by students in attendance and

via social media platforms like Twitter, addressing issues from how University researchers can help mitigate the effects of climate change to how the institution’s UHealth system could be expanded to serve more patients.

Frenk’s presidency marks his definitive return to an institution he visited as a medical student in Mexico. As he explained at the Town Hall, he came to UM for a National Institutes of Health drug abuse training course 30 years ago because “this was really the best place to come for the topic I was interested in.”

Noting that UM was a leader in his field of study when he came here, he added, “I want us to continue that leadership and build on it, to broaden it, to deepen it.”



For updates on President Frenk’s inauguration on January 29, 2016, visit [inauguration.miami.edu](http://inauguration.miami.edu). To view his Town Hall event and video interviews, go to [miami.edu/magazine](http://miami.edu/magazine).