

LAS VEGAS SUN

People of note:

Director has high hopes for Nevada Cancer Institute



Sam Morris

By [Brendan Buhler](#) ([contact](#))

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As a doctor, John Ruckdeschel, the recently installed director of the Nevada Cancer Institute, is a clinical oncologist specializing in lung cancer. And as an administrator, he

is one of the few people in the country with the experience of taking a cancer center from infancy to National Cancer Institute recognition and national prestige.

But his life nearly went another way.

In college he wanted to be an aeronautical engineer. Then one day in 1965, his eyes glazed over at an equation stretching across the chalkboard and the years to come. It was about a log floating down a river, and the class was calculating the forces acting on the log — the current, wind, gravity, the planet's spin — every possible force.

“I had an epiphany, which was, ‘I don't want to do this for the rest of my life,’” Ruckdeschel says.

And so it was off to the State University of New York at Albany and the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. And as graduation loomed, so did the Vietnam War. Young male doctors could enlist in the military, take their chances with the draft, flee the country or get a draft-protected job in public service. No surprise, then, that when Ruckdeschel applied for a job with the National Cancer Institute, he faced stiff competition. He got the job and interned at Harvard Medical School.

In 1992 he left a faculty job at Albany to take over the Moffitt Cancer Center in Tampa, Fla. It was newly built, runty but with promise, Ruckdeschel says, “it was not exactly Harvard we had next door to us as a university.”

And within 10 years he had taken Moffitt from zero dollars in federal funding to more than \$40 million, not to mention the National Cancer Institute's designation of Moffitt as a Comprehensive Cancer Center.

It's a success story the Nevada Cancer Institute hopes to follow, which is why Jim Murren, co-founder of the institute, flew to Detroit to woo Ruckdeschel away from the well-established Karmanos Cancer Institute. Murren, Ruckdeschel says, “made me an offer I couldn't refuse, and I didn't even have to sleep with a severed horse's head in my bed,” Ruckdeschel says.

Financial considerations aside, the challenge appealed to Ruckdeschel. It is a return to what he likes best, a chance to combine his roles as a man of science and a man of business to build a nationally recognized cancer center.

Ruckdeschel is taking it over at a crucial moment, needing what he calls “the liberal application of money and energy” so it can earn National Cancer Institute designation and a steady flow of research grants and pharmaceutical trials. It's also a painfully difficult moment, because the local economy is suffering and wealthy donors — the lifeblood of a growing cancer center — are fewer and less wealthy than they were before.

But Ruckdeschel is a man of many interests, and one serves him well here. He hunts. He speaks a smattering of Latin, Turkish, Japanese and Spanish. And his favorite hobby of all time was serving as a volunteer firefighter.

He says, “There’s a personality where, when you see a burning building, you either run into it or you don’t.”

Welcome to Nevada, Dr. Ruckdeschel.

<http://www.lasvegassun.com/news/2009/may/27/cancer-official-builder-type/>