

# ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT



**Monica Reyes, Ph.D.**

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## Go beyond your comfort zone

Monica Reyes, Ph.D., began her pre-doctoral training with a clear vision of her future: working at the bench, conducting experiments to advance the scientific community's understanding of cancer. But today, more than a decade later, she is shaping cancer research in ways she never imagined.

Reyes had a passion for science for as long as she could remember, but personal experiences with friends and family members living with cancer ultimately compelled her to pursue a career in oncology.

"Their stories inspired me to want to make an impact to help improve cancer treatments and outcomes," she says.

After earning her Bachelor of Science in Biomedical Sciences from the University of South Florida in 2005, Reyes spent three years gaining hands-on lab experience. In 2007, she decided to leave the state she'd always called home to pursue a year-long postbaccalaureate at Baylor College of Medicine.

That experience became a turning point, solidifying her ambition to become a biomedical researcher. In 2008, she joined the Cancer Biology Ph.D. program at the MD Anderson UTHealth Houston Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, investigating the RANK/RANKL signaling pathway in triple-negative breast cancer and COX2 signaling pathway in inflammatory breast cancer.

"MD Anderson is among the top-ranked institutions that has a Cancer Biology Ph.D. program and provides exceptional training in Biomedical Sciences for graduate students," says Reyes. "I envisioned training at an NCI-designated comprehensive cancer center to achieve my goal of becoming a biomedical researcher, and so I knew with the cross-disciplinary environment and multiple opportunities for career development, MD Anderson would be the right choice for me."

After earning her Ph.D. in 2014, Reyes immediately began her postdoctoral training at MD Anderson – this time, in epidemiology and under the mentorship of Michelle Hildebrandt, Ph.D., professor, Lymphoma-Myeloma Research.

“At one point, I realized I wanted to try something different; that’s why I went to epidemiology,” says Reyes. “Although my pre-doctoral and doctoral training was in pre-clinical and translational cancer research, I became interested in learning about the impact of cancer treatments on quality of life and how biomarkers can predict outcomes among patients diagnosed with cancer. I leveraged the skills and knowledge, like protocol writing and data analytics, I gained from the laboratory to pursue research in cancer prevention and epidemiology as a postdoctoral fellow.”

Her postdoctoral journey reached a defining moment when she earned the highly competitive R25T Cancer Prevention Research Training Fellowship. The award enabled her to conduct advanced RNA sequencing research in stem cell–derived cardiomyocytes, revealing critical changes caused by doxorubicin in DNA damage and cell cycle-associated genes. Beyond yielding these scientific findings, the experience gave Reyes skills that continue to shape her career.

“My experience with managing projects and being mentored at MD Anderson – a lot of these skills transferred over and have been invaluable in my current role. There are so many faculty, workshops and different opportunities,” says Reyes. “I recall taking a grant writing workshop, from which I learned how to draft a manuscript for one of my studies. Even today, I will refer to what I learned for drafting materials for clinical trials.”

“There’s so much structure and organization, and that makes a difference and sets MD Anderson apart,” adds Reyes.

Following her training at MD Anderson, Reyes stepped into academia as an adjunct professor and lecturer at local colleges before returning to Florida to complete an additional postdoctoral fellowship at Moffitt Cancer Center. In 2022, after a brief role as an epidemiologist in biotechnology research, she returned to Moffitt Cancer Center, where she works as a Research Project Manager today.

In her current role, Reyes manages The Justice Study, a large, prospective multi-site phase II investigator-initiated trial. This study focuses on real-world outcomes and biomarker-driven responses to immunotherapy and chemotherapy in patients diagnosed with non-small cell lung cancer. Her day-to-day tasks include protocol editing and writing, manuscript and abstract editing and overseeing tasks for the study.

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“I couldn’t have predicted this was something I would enjoy doing,” says Reyes. “I am still supporting cancer research, just in a different way and in an environment that I really enjoy.”

Reyes says while her journey didn’t follow the route she first envisioned, embracing the unfamiliar opened doors to roles that continue to broaden her career and research – a mindset she now encourages others to adopt.

“Go beyond your comfort zone. If there’s ever an opportunity to pursue a different field that you’re interested in or to join a training program outside of your home state, I would say take the chance to do that. The network connections you make and the skills you develop will be invaluable to your career.”

Outside of work, Reyes enjoys spending time with her two kids, going to soccer games, reading novels and attending yoga and Pilates classes.

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