

# LESSONS FROM DR. DARTH VADER

By Lisa Crutchfield

On normal days, pediatric hospitalist **CLIFTON LEE, M'94, H'98**, dons his usual white coat and gathers the students and residents for the morning's rounds. The associate professor is known in the Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU for his compassionate and family-centered bedside manner when visiting patients.

But one day a year, things get a little unconventional. On Halloween, it's Dr. Darth Vader making those rounds, accompanied by residents and students also dressed as Star Wars characters.

"You need a human aspect to medicine instead of talking about tests and medications," Lee says. "Without that, it's not a complete journey to health."

Dressing up on Halloween is just one way Lee makes the hospital friendlier for pediatric patients and their families. As co-director of the pediatrics clerkship, he looks for ways to set an example for his students, showing them that it's OK to step outside the role of serious physician and display your humanity.

Lee graduated from VCU's School of Medicine and completed his pediatric residency on the MCV Campus, too. He credits Pediatrics Professor **BARRY V. KIRKPATRICK, M'66, H'71, F'73**, his attending during residency, for teaching him the importance of connecting with patients and parents, and inspiring him to teach others.

After a stint working in the community, Lee returned to the university in 2011 and helped establish VCU Health's pediatric hospitalist program. He now directs its pediatric hospital medicine fellowship.

Last fall, Lee was honored with the Irby-James Award for Excellence in Clinical Teaching, recognizing superior teaching and professionalism in clinical medicine taught in the last two years of medical school and residency training.

"We do well with passing on knowledge, and that will make students fine physicians," he reflected at the award presentation. "It takes more to make an excellent physician. Honesty, integrity, empathy and compassion are important for how we care for patients and interact with others."

Dressing up like Darth Vader – even if it's just once a year – is a teaching tool that reinforces the compassion Lee tries to demonstrate every day. 🙌



## DR. VADER SAYS

*Star Wars* is my **ultimate favorite movie**, dating back to 1977 when I was 10 years old. And while Darth Vader isn't necessarily my favorite character, I have the helmet.

If I can **bring a smile** to the children for a little while and make them forget about the fact that they're in the hospital, it's worth it.

Some kids think doctors are **very scary**. But we do our best to make sure they don't feel they're in a scary place.

Sometimes it's OK to wear costumes and walk around and make kids laugh. It reminds us **why we became physicians** in the first place.

## DR. LEE SAYS

I want to serve as a **guide to families**. I can explain the reasons why their child is in the hospital and what we need to do to make the child feel better. It's very rewarding.

When you're a third-year medical student, your focus should change from what must I do to make good grades and do well to what must I do to care for my patients. You need to **change your perspective**.

As a physician, you're taught that you want to take care of the patient but **there's more to it** than just taking care of their physical needs. In pediatrics, we also have the family that needs to be taken care of.

Patients are more than the disease they have. Talk to them. Learn something about them and what they like. If you don't **know them as a person**, it doesn't matter if you know their disease.

When the day comes to say your child is well enough to go home today, the smile that comes with that is **worth everything**.

Photography by Allen Jones, VCU University Marketing