What led you to become a geriatrician?

When I was growing up I became very close friends with our next-door neighbor, this really inspirational older woman who kind of adopted me as her “first grandchild.” While other kids might be playing sports, I would run over there every day after school and play board games and cards with her. We moved away when I was still little but we stayed pen pals for the next 20 years until she died while I was in medical school. My daughter Claudia is named after her. I never really thought of her as a “senior,” just this really cool older friend and role model I could talk to about anything, but looking back I am sure our relationship and the example she set for me as an older adult who knew how to live life to the fullest (even though she had bad arthritis) had a huge impact on how I viewed seniors. When I was doing my training in internal medicine in New York City, it quickly became clear that my favorite patients were the older ones, but strangely, this was the group for which I felt least qualified to provide excellent care. It hit me how little of my medical school training had focused on seniors. I was just starting out my career, and I decided I wanted not only to be able to take great care of older patients myself, but also to become a scientist helping to figure out how we can provide the best possible care for older adults. My goal is that more seniors live like Claudine did.

What do you enjoy most about being a geriatrician?

I am constantly in awe of how very personal my work is. I love that I have the honor and opportunity to connect with real people in such a meaningful way. I also love the “nerdy” side of medicine that requires me to keep up on the latest science in order to help my patients get the best possible care.

Tell us about yourself. What do you enjoy doing when you’re not seeing patients?

I have been married 21 years to another physician/scientist (Mitch Wong), and we have an 18-year-old daughter (Claudia) and a 16-year-old son (JP). I spend a lot of time watching them play sports. Claudia left for college this year so I don’t go to as many swim meets as I used to, but JP’s baseball schedule keeps me busy. All four of us are huge Dodgers fans (fun but stressful as the Dodgers fans out there know…). I am a runner and am thinking of running my third L.A. Marathon this year—it starts with sunrise at Dodgers stadium!
What is your wish list?
One wish is support for a program to make sure that older adults don’t receive unnecessary and potentially harmful care. The idea is to take the scientific findings we already know about what works and what does not (and what causes harm), and make sure these findings are seamlessly translated into the patient-care experience every single time. This wish could be on a small-scale (for example starting only with one condition such as unnecessary X-rays before surgery) or as big as an endowment supporting a permanent system for protecting patients from unnecessary tests and procedures. The thing I love about this program is that it results in real, meaningful results like keeping patients out of the hospital and allowing them more time to do the things they really enjoy, such as spending time with family and friends. If we take this program to scale at UCLA, we could prevent thousands of patients from experiencing needless hospitalizations.

What might someone be surprised to know about you?
We have a giant Major League Baseball standings board on the wall in our kitchen that we update daily during baseball season.