Bitten by the Science Bug

Thomas Unnasch

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Fear: Exposure to nasty diseases and virus-carrying bugs doesn’t worry him in his travels, he says. “The thing that concerns me more than anything else is a traffic accident.”

Interests: Fly fishing, woodworking (he made a dozen of his family’s furniture pieces) and classical music

Tom Unnasch’s career has taken him throughout Africa and Latin America. He’s been up close with cholera and spent one birthday driving 10 hours to escape Ivory Coast during a coup.

This month, his career takes him to Tampa. Under the auspices of Florida’s 21st Century World Class Scholars program, in which the Legislature in 2006 set aside $20 million to recruit nationally known talent in the sciences, technology, engineering and math, the University of South Florida is bringing Unnasch, his research team and his equipment from the University of Alabama-Birmingham, where he has been for 18 years. He was looking for a place focused on public health and the eradication and prevention of disease. USF’s researchers, facilities and direction impressed him.

The New Jersey native says his father, who has a chemical engineering degree, influenced him and his brother to become scientists. After studying at Rutgers University and MIT, he moved into molecular and biochemical studies of parasites as a Harvard postdoc. He became an expert in the ways of the parasite that causes river blindness, still the second-largest cause of infectious blindness in the world and still prevalent in Africa and a few spots in South America.

As drug therapy has succeeded in cutting the spread of infection, the river blindness parasite is “mostly a hobby at this point,” says Unnasch, 53. He’s hard at work on a parasite that is one of the causes of elephantiasis and also studies mosquito-borne arboviruses such as West Nile and Eastern Equine Encephalitis. Part of USF’s attraction was that West Nile and Eastern Equine are more common in Florida than Alabama and that Tampa has the state’s laboratory for arboviruses. “My career has sort of been serendipitous all the way,” Unnasch says.