If you have taken your children to a pediatrician in Columbia anytime in the last three decades, chances are James Stallworth, M.D. had a hand in training that physician. His energy and enthusiasm are transformative and much of the reason that so many young medical students at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine choose pediatrics as their specialty. There just aren’t too many people quite as cool as Dr. Jimmy Stallworth.

When he came to Columbia to help bolster the faculty of a fledgling Department of Pediatrics, he thought he might like to stay for just a year or so. “I felt I was rather provincial in my training, I lived in Alabama all my life. I went to high school there, got my undergraduate degree from the University of Alabama, my medical degree from the University of Alabama, and completed my residency at the University of Alabama, Birmingham, so I thought I needed to get away at least for a year,” he says.

That was 30 years ago. And the department he helped build, well, it’s been ranked number one in the country several years running for the number of graduates who pass their boards.

Whether in a classroom or an exam room, Stallworth’s presence is commanding. He can soothe a child’s fears, calm parents’ concerns and instill confidence and trust in medical students that they truly are healers. That’s why Stallworth has won the medical school’s highest teaching honor nine times, was named faculty teacher of the year 15 times, and was presented the Ramage Award for Leadership in Humane Education, an honor — incidentally bestowed by family physicians rather than pediatricians.

This year, the Association of American Medical Colleges, the organization that accredits medical schools in the U.S. and Canada, presented Stallworth with its 2010 Alpha Omega Alpha Robert J. Glaser Distinguished Teacher Award, an international honor. Stallworth also holds the distinction of being the only living, full-time USC faculty member with a scholarship in his name.

Success in academic medicine is measured by much the same standard as any other field. One must have excellent communications skills, a realization of limitations, an ability not to be offended by honest disagreement, the capacity to use disagreement to the advantage of one’s team, and recognition that as a leader, one can’t please everybody. “That’s my downfall. I’m a pleaser,” he says. But he has a reputation that precedes him. He makes learning pleasurable, but never at the expense of the gravity of what that learning is about — making kids’ lives and health better. “I guess to some degree I am a performer for the learners to enjoy, but they already know they’re not going to get away with anything, so don’t even try it,” he says laughing.

Stallworth says his work is his mistress. “I’m at a place where education is valued. What gets me out of bed in the morning is to reflect on how I’m going to make an impact today. How am I going to inspire learners? Selfishly, it gives me a lot of pride.”