As we in the health center movement celebrate the 50th anniversary of our founding this year, it is most appropriate that we celebrate the life and achievements of one of our co-founders — Dr. H. Jack Geiger. Jack is a unique and very special individual, and has been so for all of his 90 years.

In 1940, at the tender age of fourteen, Jack ran away from his middle-class Jewish home in Brooklyn and knocked on the door of an eminent African-American actor named Canada Lee. He had met Mr. Lee a few months before when his parents had taken him to see a play in Harlem, and had been invited backstage to meet the venerable thespian. Jack asked Lee if he could move in with him. After calling Jack’s parents to alert them and alleviate their concerns, Lee said yes. Geiger spent a full year in Lee’s Harlem apartment, mixing with many of the great figures of the Harlem renaissance — people like Langston Hughes, Billy Strayhorn, Richard Wright, Adam Clayton Powell, and Billie Holiday. His experience over that period set the course for the remainder of his remarkable life.

First, as World War II broke out, Jack felt a duty to serve, but he refused to enlist in a service that discriminated against African-Americans, or any American of color. That eliminated the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines — leaving the only remaining uniformed service, the Merchant Marines. After his training, he managed to get assigned to the only boat captained by an African-American, the USS Booker T. Washington, and spent the rest of the war ferrying arms and other vital goods across the Atlantic, always at risk for being blown out of the water by a German U-Boat.

Following the war, Jack finished his undergraduate work and became a medical science reporter. Then he decided to study medicine. As a student at Case Western Reserve Medical School in Cleveland, OH, he wangled a fellowship to study healthcare in (then-apartheid) South Africa, where he assisted the legendary British public health experts Sidney and Emily Kark, who had spearheaded a new “Community Oriented Primary Care” (COPC) model of care in the homelands of South Africa. There, Jack witnessed a model of care that he later said was so quintessentially American in nature but did not exist anywhere in the U.S. But a few short years later, he would have the opportunity to introduce that model back home in America.

Following completion of his medical training, Jack and a fellow physician, Dr. Count Gibson, founded the Medical Committee for Human Rights as the healthcare arm of the American Civil Rights Movement. Jack and Count walked beside the Reverend Dr. Martin
Luther King, Jr. and others during many of the seminal moments of the movement. In early 1965, when the freedom marchers were brutally attacked on “Bloody Sunday” as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the road from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, Jack and Count rendered life-saving medical treatment to several of them, including the young civil rights leader John Lewis. Lewis’ injuries were severe enough that he needed hospital care, but Jack and Count knew that there was not a hospital in the South that would accept him, so Count — then the Chair of Tufts University Medical School’s Department of Preventive Medicine — arranged to have him medically evacuated to Tufts Hospital in Boston, where life-saving care was provided. Today, Lewis represents the 5th District of Georgia in the United States Congress.

In those sometimes dark but always hopeful early days of the fight for American justice and equality, Jack and Count revealed to each other their shared dedication to healthcare as a basic human right. Jack spoke of his life-changing experience with the Karks in the community-based health clinics in South Africa. Shortly after, Jack and Count persuaded officials at President Lyndon Johnson’s vanguard War on Poverty agency (the Office of Equal Opportunity) to invest in a pilot effort to deliver healthcare in disenfranchised inner-city and rural communities.

The first health centers opened their doors in 1965, combining comprehensive primary health care with public health and community economic development and empowerment. Both men spent the next several years of their lives helping to develop those first health centers and formulating the unique character of the American Health Center Movement, where it remains unchanged to this day, as a system of care that is of the community, by the community, and for the community being served. Over nearly a half-century, the model has grown exponentially, not only providing the highest quality primary care, but also opening the broader doors of the healthcare system to populations at greatest health risk.

Beyond Jack’s seminal contribution to community health centers is his enormous body of work in civil and human rights, both in the U.S. and around the world. Jack was a founding member of the Congress...
JACK GEIGER CONTINUED

In South Africa, Jack witnessed a model of care that he later said was so quintessentially American in nature but did not exist anywhere in the U.S.

Following the collapse of apartheid, he served as a consultant to South Africa’s Ministry of Health and as a member of the consultative mission to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He was an NGO delegate to the United Nations Conference on Racism and Discrimination, in Durban in 2000.

Jack was also a founding member of Physicians for Social Responsibility and was a co-author of the first major publication in the U.S. on the medical consequences of nuclear war. He led a PSR delegation to the Soviet Union to explore the health consequences of the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986. He received the Award of Merit in Global Public Health from the Public Health Association of New York in 1982.

Today, Jack is the Arthur C. Logan Professor Emeritus of Community Medicine, City University of New York Medical School. A recipient of numerous awards and honors, he has authored more than 100 scientific articles, book chapters and monographs on topics ranging from the medical consequences of nuclear war to the impact of poverty, segregation, and racism on health and the role of physicians in the protection of human rights. He is a spokesperson of unsurpassed eloquence for health, medicine, and human rights, whose life’s work has been recognized by the medical schools at Columbia University, Case Western Reserve, the State University of New York, St. Louis University, Harvard, and Morehouse; by the National Medical Association and the national Blue Cross-Blue Shield Association; by the American Public Health Association and the national Blue Cross-Blue Shield Association; by the American Public Health Association and by South Africa’s Ministry of Health; by the National Academy of Sciences and its Institute of Medicine; and by the Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers and our own National Association of Community Health Centers.

The results of Jack’s life-long efforts can be seen in thousands of communities throughout the nation, and his contributions to healthcare and human rights rank among the most important of the past half century, none more so than the introduction of the community health center model into America. ◆

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