

REFLECTIONS

ON OUR **50**TH ANNIVERSARY

Our Mighty Program's Fragile and Uncertain Beginnings

BY DAN HAWKINS
*Senior Vice President for
Public Policy and Research
NACHC*

As we near the end of the 50th anniversary of our Health Center Movement, I wanted to take a moment to reflect on some of the early trailblazers who inspired those of us who followed to the point at which we stand today: 24 million Americans receiving better healthcare and a better life as well.

In my last column, I spoke about the remarkable life and achievements of one of our founding parents, **Dr. H. Jack Geiger**. In this column, I want to share insights from a very special opportunity I had last summer to participate in the dedication of the new H. Jack Geiger Medical Center building at the Delta Health Center in Mound Bayou, MS, one of America's very

first community health centers. I joined Jack, who is now approaching his 90th birthday, along with several of his long-time friends and colleagues, many of whom were original staff of the Delta Health Center back in the 1960s. These brave souls, who were the true "fire-starters" of what has become a national movement for better health and social justice in underserved communities all across America, looked back on those perilous times and marveled at how their humble beginnings had grown to become such a powerful force for good health — and for good jobs and economic benefits — in thousands of poor and minority communities in every state in the union.

I met **Dr. Andrew James, PhD**, an environmentalist who trained a dozen of Mississippi's first-ever black sanitarians working in Bolivar County and throughout the state. Jack and Andy talked about their initiative to bring clean water and sanitary pit toilets to many homes that had previously lacked both. I also chatted with **Dr. Helen Barnes**, an African American obstetrician whom Jack recruited and who in turn recruited the state's first certified nurse midwife and developed Mississippi's first birthing clinic at Mound Bayou. The list goes on and on...

As I listened to the veterans reminisce about our movement's earliest and most difficult days, I was reminded that people like myself had it much easier than these early pioneers, precisely because they blazed the trail for us. They forged a clear path in the healthcare wilderness, amidst great peril, so that we could carry this movement forward, to the benefit of millions who had never known either good healthcare OR good health.

What was most remarkable to me was that, while many of those early trailblazers had moved on to other places and other challenges, they have all remained faithful to the beliefs that brought them to Mound Bayou in the first place, and the commitment to make life just a little bit better for others.

Not long after the dedication, I attended the funeral and memorial for **Dr. Aaron Shirley**, one of those who provided crucial help

to Jack as he was struggling to build the Delta Health Center. Jack has told the story of how, after several years of struggle with the state of Mississippi and the federal government, the understaffed and overwhelmed health center began providing clinical services in Mound Bayou in 1967. Aaron left his practice in Jackson and drove 140 miles to Mound Bayou and back twice a week to help out. Another early health center and civil rights icon, **Dr. Bob Smith**, learned to fly, borrowed a plane, flew to the Delta and back, doing the same. For each of them, 20-hour days, unasked.

Back in Jackson, Aaron launched the Jackson-Hinds Health Center — but the Governor attempted to veto its grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), the federal war on poverty agency, under a little-noticed provision of the OEO Act. Aaron flew to Washington and in a lunchtime meeting, convinced President Richard Nixon's OEO director, Donald Rumsfeld, to override the veto. Shortly after, he and the folks at OEO learned that some federal grant funding checks that had been mailed to Jackson-Hinds had mysteriously disappeared and never been delivered. So they conspired to send the next checks to Aaron's home in shoe boxes wrapped up to look like birthday presents.

Jackson-Hinds grew to become one of the largest health centers in the state, with 16 satellites, its core strength in community involve-

ment and attention to such social determinants of health as food and affordable housing for elderly African Americans.

In 1982, NACHC asked Dr. Shirley to testify at a House Budget Committee hearing on President Reagan's fiscal 1983 budget. By then, the Health Center Program had experienced a 25 percent funding cut as part of President Reagan's first year budget offensive. Dr. Shirley spoke eloquently and very directly of the pain and harm caused by the Reagan budget to the poor and people of color — and when he finished his statement, one Member of the Committee said to him, his voice dripping with sarcasm and condescension, "I sure hope you practice medicine better than you provide testimony," to which Dr. Shirley replied, "I strive to provide the best care every day to the people I serve." Direct and to the point, Aaron was the picture of civility even in the most uncivil of moments — a model of how to carry oneself in the most atrocious situations. While he never compromised his deeply-held beliefs and principles, he also believed firmly that the way to win was always found in treating others — even entrenched opponents — with respect and dignity.

This was the way Aaron lived his life, in much the same way as Jack Geiger, Bob Smith, and so many others, have lived theirs — and for that we can all be eternally grateful. ♦