

A New Day

My father was a problem solver who viewed people and their circumstances through the keen eyes of compassion and realism. What improved their surrounding physical circumstances was pivotal in improving the quality of their lives. Innovation dwells in the creative mind of one who truly seeks a solution. Moral strength is power. While some proceed with caution, my father proceeded with courage to create a more humane approach to patient care.

In 1971, the Wayne Miner Health Center (WHMC) moved to 825 Euclid Avenue, to a forty-seven-thousand square foot facility designed specifically for healthcare services, directly across the street from the former WMHC projects. Their compassionate healthcare approach attracted five thousand new patients.

A NEW VISION IN HEALTHCARE DELIVERY

Dr. Rodgers envisioned, then conceptually designed every detail of the new health center with the goal of removing any physical, mental, financial, socio-economic, class or language barriers.

Jim Nunnally explained, “He thought about the physical workflow, the patients first encounter as they entered the lobby, who would greet them, where and how they would get to their specified appointments, how long they would wait, and how they would travel to and from the facility.” “Most importantly, how they would afford their care and pay for the prescribed medications.”

NAVIGATION

The philosophy of navigation thru the healthcare system was born and implemented at the Sam Rodgers Health Center by Dr. Rodgers. It involved viewing patients as humanly valued, and went well beyond way-finding signage systems, focusing on the human element of how a patient was addressed within a healthcare system. Navigation focused on the patients comfort level and trust of the healthcare system, too often ignored.

Based on my father’s vision, there would be no obstacle, whether imagined or actualized, to receiving quality healthcare by this new patient population. There were many reasons based on the racist mistreatment of African Americans throughout the history of this country for them to be suspicious and distrustful of a system that had consistently ignored, taken advantage of and excluded their healthcare needs and humanity. Dr. Rodgers left no stone unturned in his detailed consideration of patient deterrents.

UNIFORMS

The traditional uniformed practice of “doctors and medical staff in white coats” was eliminated as it created an unapproachability issue for this population of patients. My father wanted to eliminate any fear or hesitation for the patients, who were on the receiving side of healthcare. The RN’s wore gold and

the LPN's wore turquoise jackets, to distinguish status, over their natural clothes. Jim added, "The only medical practitioners allowed to wear "white waiter style jackets" were Dentists".

In 1974 I began my studies at Kansas State University's School of Architecture. I remember witnessing this approach firsthand while touring the new health center with my father, as an Architectural Design student. Arriving in the large, but welcoming lobby space it became clear that your presence would not be overlooked as a patient- waiting to be called. Per my father's vision a patient would be acknowledged as having arrived and given a specific appointment time. This unique welcome said at once, "you matter here." Dr. Rodgers understood that acknowledging the patient from the beginning to the end of the medical visit-establishes your level of respect for their humanity.

EYE SEE YOU

Few details were overlooked in the design of the health center. Virtually every interior space had glass windows, not curtains. Jim later described, "You could see everything and everybody". "Patients were not left in enclosed offices or hidden behind drawn curtains where they could be forgotten and overlooked for hours, as they waited for care".

As if reading my father's mind I asked, "Why would a patient trust you one step further with their care, if they were not greeted with kindness and respect? "

Turning to face me, he responded with a knowing look and smile. He knew I understood, and with no additional explanation, we continued our tour.

WELL INTENTIONS

As we continued through the lobby, I noticed a large piece of equipment pushed against the wall - impossible to miss. The visibility of this monstrosity was its ultimate downfall. It alarmed you when stepped on the weighing platform, announcing your use. My father's latest well-intentioned addition was short-lived.

My father was described as "radical" concerning the epidemic of obesity because of the predictability that led to, and threatened, other states of disease. (i.e., Heart disease, Hypertension, Diabetes etc.) A typical weighing scale in a medical practice did not go beyond a measuring weight of 300 pounds. He ordered and installed a scale that would accommodate and record weights of up to 500 pounds.

I hadn't known - but was not surprised to hear my father described as an "obesity radical". I had childhood memories of my father hospitalizing pregnant patients who had exceeded recommended weight expectations in their early trimesters. Before the advent of insurance company takeover of healthcare; this was permissible as a doctor in the best interest of the patient.

Accompanying my parents to formal functions, me and my siblings Rickey and Rita collectively called the Three-R's, could always count on the "How's your weight?" question, as guests approached our table. My father's query was applied across the board as applicable, with no malintent. It sprang from a well of concern on his part. The guest response was never one of surprise or negativity.

“Oh Dr. Rodgers, you know how it is.” “I’m working on it!”

My father’s not so subtle weight inquiries were acceptable to his patients. It was a small price to pay, as he had proven his value with the most important gift of all; the possibility of giving birth.

My father was adored by throngs of patients that were under his care as a private practitioner; their OB-GYN. He and his medical partners were rock stars and trail blazers long before he envisioned public health and the health center. Due to segregation, and the rarity of African American board-certified medical practitioners, he was credited with delivering many of the Black children in Kansas City. The exclamation “Your father delivered me, and now my grandson and granddaughter!” was heard throughout my life.

Many patients having dealt with infertility issues, were forever grateful that under Dr. Rodgers care they eventually became parents. My father played a very important role and was present in many of their most life shattering or memorable moments. The faith filled times were never forgotten by the patients, and so it was that at formal functions our table was met with rounds of adoring patients, anxious to thank and express their joy regardless of how many years had passed. These frequent visitations during these social events were a welcome break from the routine monotony after thirty plus years of attendance. My father, above all, was an astute observer of people and their behavior. I imagine they never forgot how God answered prayers thru the use of medically skilled people eager to serve as a conduit for his miracles.

SPECIAL NEEDS

Jim continued, “We made provisions for special needs”. The health center was one of few professional facilities in the 1970’s that provided ramps for wheelchair patients long before the advent of the American Disabilities Act (ADA). “The real paradigm shift that Dr. Rodgers made was that you were not really taking care of this patient population unless you were meeting them where they were.”

“Actions speak louder than words”, continued to define my father’s approach to change, problem solving, and acceptance by others. Few people questioned his motives, proven over time. If you doubted his sincerity, you had only to watch. Change comes only with consensus, and consensus comes only with trust.