

Dr. Aaron Shirley: Champion of health care and social justice

Services for Dr. Aaron Shirley are scheduled for 11 a.m. on Saturday, Dec. 6, in Stanton Hall Auditorium in the UMMC Conference Center at the Jackson Medical Mall Thad Cochran Center. Shirley's family requests that, in lieu of flowers, memorials may be made to the Dr. Aaron Shirley Foundation in care of the Jackson Medical Mall Thad Cochran Center, 350 W. Woodrow Wilson Dr., Suite 101, Jackson, MS 39213.

A pioneer in Mississippi rural and urban health care, Dr. Aaron Shirley was so much more than an excellent physician.

Shirley, who in 1965 became the first African-American learner at UMMC when he became a pediatrics resident in the School of Medicine, dedicated his life to bringing medical care and health education services to those most in need. He died Wednesday, Nov. 26, at UMMC at the age of 81.

His legacy includes helping to establish the Jackson Medical Mall, a health-care facility devoted to the underserved, and the Jackson Hinds Comprehensive Health Center, which today is the largest community health center in the state. Shirley also formerly served as the center's director.

Shirley was longtime chairman of the board of the nonprofit Jackson Medical Mall Foundation, an organization that allowed him to shepherd not only health care for the disadvantaged, but also champion economic and community development in the mall neighborhood. He gave new life to the Jackson Medical Mall, helping to attract tenants including UMMC and its Cancer Institute, several city of Jackson departments, retail operations, and Jackson State University's School of Public Health.

"Aaron was a very wise and caring man who could have gone anywhere and done anything with his talents," said Dr. James Keeton, UMMC vice chancellor for health affairs, who was a resident at UMMC at the same time as Shirley.

"But he chose to stay in Mississippi and work to improve the health of its people, and his life of service was a testament to that," said Keeton, who is also dean of the School of Medicine. "His impact on the medical community was immense."

That includes Shirley's 40 years as a pediatrician. For many years, he was the state's only black pediatrician. He also served as a clinical instructor in UMMC's Department of Pediatrics for four decades.

Shirley became a civil rights icon and activist during his decades of breaking down racial barriers and promoting social justice.

“Even in retirement, Aaron continued to be a friend to UMMC and a champion for the elimination of health disparities across Mississippi,” said Keeton, who serves on the Jackson Medical Mall Foundation’s Board of Trustees. “He will be missed.”

Shirley was a graduate of Tougaloo College and of Meharry Medical College. The Gluckstadt native, through the Jackson Hinds Comprehensive Health Center, established a comprehensive school-based clinic in Jackson to provide health and counseling services, lowering rates of teen pregnancy, drug abuse, teen violence, sexually transmitted diseases, and mental health issues.

“The life and legacy of Dr. Shirley line up with the founding principles of the United States,” said Dr. Bettina Beech, UMMC associate vice chancellor for population health.

“His creative efforts to provide health care and improve health among disadvantaged and disenfranchised populations serve as a shining example for future health and health-care providers.”

Several years ago, Shirley envisioned the creation of a public charter school to be run by the Jackson Medical Mall Foundation that would give teens the tools and coursework to pursue careers in health care.

“He was such a visionary man. He saw things that other people couldn’t see, and tried things that many people would not have thought possible,” said Dr. Beverly Wade Hogan, Tougaloo College president and a member of the Jackson Medical Mall Foundation’s Board of Trustees.

Hogan shared a friendship of more than 30 years with Shirley and his wife, Ollye, and is thankful for Shirley’s service as a former member of Tougaloo’s Board of Trustees. At the time of his death, the Distinguished Tougaloo Alumnus was a trustee emeritus.

“This state and nation are really indebted to him for his vision in extending health care to the disadvantaged and underserved populations,” Hogan said. “His tenacity was always encouraging. He was challenging. He would push himself and others, and when he had an idea that something could work, he didn’t have any kind of a stoplight. That is truly what leadership is all about.”

In 1993, Shirley received the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, also known as the Genius Grant, for his creativity in bringing health care to the state’s rural and urban populations. He received the Governor’s Initiative for Volunteer Excellence, or GIVE Award, in 2009.

“He tried to level the playing field for all people, and through his work in health care, he was building up equity and using health care as a social equalizer,” Hogan said.

“That was really at the core of his vision and the work that he did.”