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Profiles in Leadership: Dr. Alma Littles leading new generation of physicians

BY: BILL WELLOCK (MAILTO:WWELLOCK@FSU.EDU) | PUBLISHED: FEBRUARY 23, 2022 | 12:04 PM | SHARE: [f](https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fnews.fsu.edu%2Fnews%2F2022%2F02%2F23%2Fprofiles-in-leadership-dr-alma-littles-leading-new-generation-of-physicians%2F) (HTTPS://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/SHARER/SHARER.PHP?U=HTTPS%3A%2F%2FNEWS.FSU.EDU%2FNEWS%2F2022%2F02%2F23%2FPROFILES-IN-LEADERSHIP-DR-ALMA-LITTLES-LEADING-NEW-GENERATION-OF-PHYSICIANS%2F) [t](https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?source=http%3A%2F%2Fhttps%3A%2F%2Fnews.fsu.edu%2Fnews%2F2022%2F02%2F23%2Fprofiles-in-leadership-dr-alma-littles-leading-new-generation-of-physicians%2F&text=profiles+in+leadership%3A+dr.+alma+littles+leading+new+generation+of+physicians:%20https%3A%2F%2Fnews.fsu.edu%2Fnews%2F2022%2F02%2F23%2Fprofiles-in-leadership-dr-alma-littles-leading-new-generation-of-physicians%2F) (HTTPS://TWITTER.COM/INTENT/TWEET?SOURCE=HTTP%3A%2F%2FHTTPS%3A%2F%2FNEWS.FSU.EDU%2FNEWS%2F2022%2F02%2F23%2FPROFILES-IN-LEADERSHIP-DR-ALMA-LITTLES-LEADING-NEW-GENERATION-OF-PHYSICIANS%2F&TEXT=PROFILES+IN+LEADERSHIP%3A+DR.+ALMA+LITTLES+LEADING+NEW+GENERATION+OF+PHYSICIANS:%20HTTPS%3A%2F%2FNEWS.FSU.EDU%2FNEWS%2F2022%2F02%2F23%2FPROFILES-IN-LEADERSHIP-DR-ALMA-LITTLES-LEADING-NEW-GENERATION-OF-PHYSICIANS%2F)



Dr. Alma Littles, Senior Associate Dean for Medical Education and Academic Affairs. (FSU Photography Services/Bill Lax)

Dr. Alma Littles' commitment to service was born in her hometown of Quincy, Florida, long before she came to the Florida State University College of Medicine.

She first learned the rewards of helping others from her parents. Their house was a meeting spot for the neighborhood, one of the first houses in the community with a telephone, which was shared by friends and neighbors. It was a gathering spot for Sunday dinners that had a place for anyone who showed up and was a source of comfort for anyone who had an unmet need. Helping others was simply part of who they were, Littles said.

Quincy was also where she first saw how improved access to health care could help her Florida Panhandle community. She was the youngest of 12 children. One of her sisters died when an artery in her lung was blocked by a blood clot after giving birth to twins. One of those twins, her nephew, died shortly after birth. Her father died of a heart attack when she was 14. People in her life were suffering from illnesses that they didn't seem to be able to find treatment for.

"Seeing all of this, and now understanding what the role of a physician was, it really solidified that seed that had been planted by my second-grade teacher," Littles said. "Being a doctor would allow me to help alleviate some of this suffering that I was seeing around me."

She started telling people she was going to be a doctor. At the time, Littles didn't really understand what that meant. But her parents showed her the importance of service, and as she grew older and understood more about the need for accessible health care, she realized that physicians played a critical role in communities.

That desire to serve led Littles to return home to Gadsden County after medical school to practice and continues to inspire her as she works to train the next generation of health care professionals as the Senior Associate Dean for Medical Education and Academic Affairs at the FSU College of Medicine.

The Gadsden County Black History and Educational Organization will honor Littles during the 42nd annual Gadsden County Black History Festival & Parade on Feb. 26. The theme is "Spotlighting Black Health and Wellness," fitting for someone who has made improving community health her life's work.

"What brought me into the College of Medicine was looking at the mission statement of what the college was created to do," Littles said. "It was almost like my personal and professional mission statement. The college's priorities are the very things that I am interested in. I was from a rural area, and I was interested in the health care of people from rural areas and in recruiting more students from those places into medicine. The words in the mission

statement about serving underserved communities were like they were written for me.”

She saw the added burden her neighbors dealt with to access medical care and the consequences of that difficulty. For some neighbors, a trip to visit a physician or hospital in Tallahassee was an onerous, time-consuming undertaking. That translated to less preventive care and more health problems for patients.

She kept that thought with her as she attended medical school at the University of Florida then graduated and returned to Quincy as a primary care physician. She could see people appreciated having care that was convenient for them and having a doctor who knew more about their lives.

“Patients are more likely to open up to you if they know that you understand where they’re coming from and what they’re dealing with, not just with health care, but other parts of their life as well,” Littles said. “Things like school and work, you name it, all of the things that have to be managed in a rural area, especially where resources are limited. When patients have a connection with you, there is more trust of the care you’re providing and the advice you’re giving.”

In church, at high school football games, in the grocery store and elsewhere, patients had questions. Littles lived and worked in her community. She went on home visits to reach people who couldn’t make it to her office. She saw all sorts of health needs: a newborn coming in for a checkup, a newly diagnosed diabetes case, an elderly patient whose daughter thought he shouldn’t be driving. She loved the variety and loved providing patient care.

She also wanted to do more.

She had experience in roles that required teaching, and those had proved immensely rewarding. She also had served as a member of the committee selecting students for the Program in Medical Sciences at FSU, a forerunner of the College of Medicine. When the college welcomed its inaugural class in 2001, Littles was there to serve as the acting, and later founding, chair of the Department of Family Medicine and Rural Health and acting assistant dean for the Tallahassee Regional Medical School Campus. Soon after that, she became the Senior Associate Dean for Medical Education and Academic Affairs.

Familiarity with the working rhythm of a family physician, which comes with unexpected challenges each day, has served her well in that role. Littles has been an integral part of a variety of projects, including the college’s accreditation and reaccreditation, the development of the curriculum and the growth of the college’s regional campus model for third- and fourth-year medical students.

“It has been tremendously rewarding to watch the program grow from its infancy into what it is today,” she said. “The success of our students once they leave the college and go off to residencies and to practice makes it all worthwhile.”

The college, which celebrated 20 years in 2020, still has a community-based, primary-care focus.

Under the FSU model, medical students complete third- and fourth-year clerkships and physician assistant students complete a year of clinical clerkships at regional campuses around the state and work one-on-one with physicians in a variety of health care settings. It’s a model that gives them the opportunity to see more patients and to perform more examinations and procedures under the direct supervision of an attending physician than a traditional clerkship would allow.

“We send students around Florida to learn medicine in community settings,” Littles said. “As opposed to only seeing patients within the walls of an academic health center, they see patients wherever the attending physician sees patients — doctor’s offices, hospitals, surgery centers, nursing homes, hospice houses, in patients’ homes — anywhere patients need care.”

She also oversees undergraduate outreach, which introduces potential future health care professionals to the field.

“Dr. Littles is an excellent physician, teacher and administrator and a great role model and mentor for our students and faculty,” said College of Medicine Dean John P. Fogarty. “She is a master at managing multiple tasks and roles locally, regionally and nationally, both efficiently and with great competence. She has served the College of Medicine from its earliest formative days and her calm, guiding hand has been key to its success.”

Littles said she is excited to help the college keep embracing its mission to help underserved populations as it continues to grow.

“The College of Medicine has developed so much but has still been able to stay true to its calling to help communities where medical care is most needed,” Littles said. “The mission we started with is still crucial. I’m especially proud of all the faculty who have helped support that goal and all the students who have made it their life’s work. It’s an honor to be part of that.”

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FSU sees record-breaking number of first-year admissions applications (<https://news.fsu.edu/news/2022/02/17/fsu-sees-record-breaking-number-of-first-year-admissions-applications/>)

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FSU Alumni Association launches season 2 of 'Echoes' podcast with women's basketball associate head coach (<https://news.fsu.edu/news/2022/02/10/fsu-alumni-association-launches-season-2-of-echoes-podcast-with-womens-basketball-associate-head-coach/>)

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