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Dr. Alma Littles...

Reaching a dream and improving lives

BY KATI SCHARDL

How many 7-year-olds really know what they will be when they grow up?

When her second-grade teacher told her she was going to be a doctor, Alma Littles knew. Even though she wasn't really sure what a doctor was, the words spoken by Hazel Jones at Stewart Street Elementary School in Quincy rang like a bell for the studious little girl.

"She saw something in me, and from that point on, when someone asked me what I wanted to be, I told them I wanted to be a doctor," said Littles, who turns 53 in March and is now the chief academic officer for FSU's College of Medicine. "Any time we had career day at school, I would dress up as a doctor."

Littles was the youngest of 12 children in a farmworker family in rural Gadsden County. To her, health care was what was provided at school or the local clinic. But as her desire to become a physician grew and she began tailoring her studies to fit that goal, she found a mentor in Quincy pediatrician Pat Woodward.

"I didn't go to him much as a doctor," she said. "But I used him as a role model going through school. He encouraged me so much that when I was applying to medical school, I wanted to be a pediatrician. I ultimately ended up specializing in family medicine because I found I enjoyed adult medicine as well as pediatric medicine, and as a family physician, I could do both."

All along, Littles had a desire to provide medical care to underserved populations – those who lacked access to or couldn't afford adequate care. That desire was fueled by personal experience.

"The seed was planted in the second grade, but the thought and goal matured," she said. "It really was more of wanting to give back to the community where I grew up, recognizing, a need for more doctors. I lost my father to a second heart attack when I was 14 years old. I lost a sister later who died after childbirth, and I had seen a nephew die of dehydration.

"The more I learned about medicine and health care, the more it seemed the things I had witnessed should be preventable."

After graduating from the University of Florida's College of Medicine, Littles returned to Quincy in 1989 to open her own practice in family medicine.

"On the one hand, I had such a great feeling of accomplishment," she said. "I knew there were a lot of people back home who were very proud of me. On the other hand, it was intimidating, because I was going to be taking care of the same folks who had been taking care of me."

ROOTS AND BRANCHES

Even as she was establishing her practice in Quincy, Littles felt there was more she could do. She felt called to educate and inspire future physicians to serve those with no access or means to seek adequate preventive medical care. In 1996, she joined the faculty of Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare's Family Medicine Residency Program and served as president of the Capital Medical Society. In 1999, she became residency director of the program, and was elected President of the Florida Academy of Family Physicians. Then in 2002 she was appointed chair of Family Medicine and Rural Health for FSU's College of Medicine.

She was especially sensitive to the medical needs of women in rural populations.

"Women are the primary caregivers of the family's health – they are the ones taking the children and making their husbands or significant others go to the doctor," Littles said. "And there are issues that particularly affect women, like childbirth and the constant worry about breast cancer, even though heart disease is the No. 1 killer of both women and men. Just being able to carve out time for themselves is a burden – they are working, just like their male partners, but they also have to take care of the household."

Littles was fortunate to have a husband, Gentle, who has been supportive of her career. When their



Makandall Saint Eloi, a first year medical student, takes direction from Dr. Little on a practice patient “body” that has a heartbeat.

son Germaine was born, her husband stopped work to stay at home with the baby while Little continued to work full time. When Germaine was 3, Gentle went back to work part time and currently works as a nurse technician at TMH. Germaine is now 20 and a student at TCC.

At FSU, Little works to recruit students who fit the College of Medicine’s mission to train physicians to care for the elderly and other underserved populations. She is looking for students like herself - students who want to make a difference.

“All medical school applicants are asked why they want to be a doctor,” Little said. “The typical answer is because they want to help people. I tell them the admissions committee is looking for evidence of that – something beyond the academic background that shows they want to be involved in the community and have done volunteer work.

“We have found that particularly when it comes to rural service, the students who come from rural areas are more likely to want to practice in or go back to rural areas. We still face a significant challenge in terms of finding enough applicants who are qualified. In

rural areas, where school systems are more likely to be depressed, it’s difficult to get the academic background to allow students to get into college, period, and when they do get in, they may be starting out behind the other students.”

Under Little, FSU maintains an academic outreach program for middle and high schools in rural areas and in Leon County to provide academic assistance and guidance for students on a medical track. And the College of Medicine sends its students out to serve in rural areas at regional campuses around the state, a program that has already borne fruit with students returning to their small communities to open practices.

FAMILY TIME

Little’s schedule is hectic and her dedication keeps her on the road attending conferences and educational forums in addition to her duties at FSU. When she wants to wind down, she just goes home to Quincy, where she and Gentle still live, to reconnect with her extended family.

“That’s my biggest relaxation, spending time with family,” she said. “Whether it’s having barbecues at the house or going out to eat with my sisters or just sitting

and visiting with them. And I am very active in my church. I like to travel but unfortunately most of my travel is work-related. I am also a college sports fanatic.”

Littles misses the one-on-one human interaction of her medical practice. But she still runs into patients, who keep her up on what’s going on with them. And she has the satisfaction of knowing she is paying forward the faith her second grade teacher had in her, and is helping send new doctors out to serve those who need it most.

“I achieved what I did with the help of a lot of other people,” she said. “When I left my practice in Quincy, it was a difficult decision, but I felt I would be able to reach more patients by helping to encourage and motivate more doctors to go into rural communities to practice.”

“And it’s still an ongoing learning experience for me.” ❖



Dr. Alma Littles is a Local Legend- literally.

In 2004, Congressman Allen Boyd nominated the Quincy-born doctor and educator to be included in the Local Legends gallery sponsored jointly by the National Institutes of Health’s National Library of Medicine, the NIH Office of Women’s Health Research and the American Medical Women’s Association. The gallery showcases women physicians who “have demonstrated commitment, originality, innovation or creativity in their fields of medicine.”

It’s one of many accolades bestowed on Littles for her dedication to recruiting and training doctors to practice rural medicine. She has also served as president of the Florida Academy of Family Physicians (1999-2000), as well as its chairman of the board (2000-2001), and was president of the Capital Medical Society in 1996. In 1999, Littles became residency director of Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare’s Family Practice Residency Program. She was appointed chair of the Department of Family Medicine and Rural Health at FSU’s College of Medicine in 2002 and was appointed associate dean for academic affairs in 2003.

Littles’ list of honors includes:

- Florida Academy of Family Physicians
Young Leader Award - 1991
- Florida Academy of Family Physicians
Family Doctor of the Year Award - 1993
- Society of Teachers of Family Medicine,
New Faculty Development Award - 1997
- TMH Family Practice Director’s Award for
Outstanding Faculty - 1999
- UNC, Chapel Hill, Dept. of Family Medicine
Fellowship in Faculty Development - 1998-99
- National Institute for Program Development Director
Development Fellowship - 2000-2001
- FSU College of Medicine Faculty Council
Outstanding Faculty Service Award - 2007
- Florida Academy of Family Physicians
Distinguished Service Award - 2007
- One of the Tallahassee Democrat’s 25 Women
You Need to Know - 2010