

'It's all about relationships'

By TYLER FRANCISCHINE

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When Alma Littles, M.D. '86, returns to Gainesville this month for Alumni Weekend, she will be most excited to reconnect with her former classmates.

"It's wonderful to come back to see the advances and growth of the medical school," she says, "and it's an opportunity to interact with classmates, some of whom I haven't seen since we graduated. But you don't forget the people who were there during that process. And medical school is a process. Those friendships last a lifetime."

On Friday, Littles will give this year's notable alumna lecture, titled "When America gets a cold, rural America gets pneumonia: addressing the health care needs of rural Americans."

Born and raised in the tiny panhandle town of Quincy, Florida, Littles has devoted her life to increasing health care access for those living in rural and underserved communities. For several years following her medical school graduation, she served as a family doctor in her native Gadsden County. In her current role as chief academic officer for Florida State University's College of Medicine, she mentors students hailing from rural towns.

Littles says her lecture will highlight the unique aspects of practicing in a rural area, as well as the ways the entire community can assist in improving access to health care for rural Americans.

"It's well-known that patients in rural areas don't fare as well as others," she says. "Not many physicians are going to be practicing in these areas, but that doesn't mean systems can't be in place to improve the situation. The advantages to practicing here are being part of a community, being in a situation where you're spending your quality time with the same people you're seeing as patients. You're part of the fabric of the community, and you're providing a needed service."

She hopes to entice some of her listeners into practicing in these areas.

"What I want people to take away is the recognition that there are challenges to patients accessing care and in the number of physicians practicing in these communities. But with newer technologies like telehealth and improvements in transportation, we can do a lot more to overcome these challenges," she says.

Littles knew medicine was her future from a young age. When her second-grade teacher told her she should become a doctor,



Alma Littles, M.D. '86, is chief academic officer for Florida State University's College of Medicine.



Littles says the friendships she made during her College of Medicine days are lifelong.

she took that advice to heart. After two of her siblings died in infancy and her father passed away from a second heart attack (and a lack of preventive care after the first), she set her goals in stone. She became the first in her family of 12 to attend college.

Some of Littles' fondest memories from her College of Medicine days are of completing rotations in rural areas around Gainesville.

"I remember thinking, 'this is my dream.' It was clear we were meeting a need that otherwise wouldn't be met," she says. "It's all about the relationships – getting to know the patients and their families."

In 2014, Black Health Magazine named Littles one of the nation's top 15 most influential African-American medical educators. She is the former director of the Family Medicine



Littles returned to Gainesville for her 25th reunion in 2011. Photo by Maria Belen Farias

Residency Program at Tallahassee Memorial Hospital and the former president of the Florida Academy of Family Physicians. Effective this month, she will serve as the chairwoman of the board of directors for Tallahassee Memorial Hospital.

In her current role as senior associate dean for medical education and academic affairs for the FSU College of Medicine, she oversees educational programming for medical students and the undergraduate outreach program. Her favorite part of her job is working with students, especially those raised in small towns.

"I enjoy that opportunity to be a mentor," she says. "Sometimes all they need is someone to say, you can do this. Being from a rural area doesn't knock you out of the running."

Littles' notable alumnus lecture will be held Friday, Oct. 14 at 2:30 p.m. at the George T. Harrell, M.D., Medical Education Building North Learning Studio.

Watch Dr. Littles' notable alumnus lecture live online

Other Alumni Weekend events on Friday include a question-and-answer panel with current M.D., M.D./Ph.D. and PA students at noon, tours of the Harrell Medical Education Building at 1:15 p.m. and the Celebrating Classes Dinner at 6:30 p.m. Events on Saturday leading up to the UF vs. Missouri football game include a student and alumni speed networking event and the annual tailgate and watch party. All events will be held at the Harrell Medical Education Building.

For more information, call the UF Office of Medical Alumni Affairs at 352-273-5939 or visit drgator.ufl.edu/aw.