

A lifetime of service

Dr. Aaron Shirley played a key role in establishing the Jackson Medical Mall

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About 70 years ago, in a house that no longer stands, a man with no family to care for him died one day - but not alone.

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His neighbor, a nurse's aide named Eddie Shirley, had taken him in after he suffered a stroke, converting her porch into a room where he spent his last days among friends.

Watching her, taking note, was Eddie Shirley's young son Aaron - now 76.

"That was my mother's heart going out," he recalled. "She did that for people. I'm sure it helped shape me."

It shaped him into the renowned Jackson physician, Dr. Aaron Shirley, who is being

honored at noon today at the Jackson Marriott as a recipient of the Governor's Initiative for Volunteer Excellence, or GIVE, Awards.

Shirley will receive GIVE's Marsha Meeks Kelly Lifetime Achievement Award.

Presented by the Mississippi Commission for Volunteer Service, GIVE Awards recognize those who have taken to heart the appeal to "love thy neighbor," said David Mallery, the commission's executive director.

The example set by Shirley's mother.



Vickie D. King/The Clarion-Ledger

Nearly 14 years ago, Dr. Aaron Shirley was instrumental in the establishment of the Jackson Medical Mall. Shirley is chairman of the board of the Medical Mall Foundation. He has been named the Governor's Initiative for Volunteer Excellence recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award.

2009 GIVE AWARD RECIPIENTS

- Dr. Aaron Shirley of Jackson: Marsha Meeks Kelly Lifetime Achievement
- Ashley Calcote of Biloxi: Achievement in Volunteer Service by Youth (ages 18 and younger)
- TEAAM of Mize (an organization that promotes autism awareness): Achievement in Volunteer Service by an Adult (ages 19-59)
- Charles Beardsley of Leesburg, Va./Mississippi Gulf Coast: Achievement in Volunteer Service by Senior Adults (ages 60 and above)
- Lenagene Waldrup of Columbus: Achievement in Volunteer Service in the Arts and Humanities
- State Rep. Steve Holland of Plantersville: Achievement in Volunteer Service by a Public Servant

"That's his makeup," said Reuben Anderson, a former state Supreme Court justice who, as an attorney, worked with Shirley in the 1960s for civil-rights causes.

"Aaron could have done a whole lot of things in life that would've benefited him more financially than trying to give health care to poor people. But as long as I've known him, his complete focus has been to make sure the underprivileged are served."

The man whose name is practically synonymous with the Jackson Medical Mall started life with few privileges of his own.

Still, before he could even pronounce the word "doctor," his mother decreed that he would be one. Back then, children listened to their mothers, Shirley said.

"She was a widow with eight children who worked as a nurse's aide and a domestic. My father died when I was 16 or 17 months old. I don't remember him. But he did leave my mother with property."

That included the house his father, Charlie Shirley, built. Torn down a decade ago, it was in west Jackson, on land that is now a Jackson State University parking lot.

It was the house Eddie Shirley devoted to sick neighbors who had no family, in the days before nursing homes.

Charlie Shirley also left behind parcels of land. Eddie Shirley sold them off, piece by piece, to pay for her children's education. She also took in boarders, and clothed her son in hand-me-downs.

"But we never felt poor," Shirley said. "I didn't want for anything I really needed."

The neighbors knew of Aaron's ambitious plans. If they doubted him, they didn't show it, he said.

"There were expectations for children back then. Parental and community expectations. I walked to school, and on those days when I was tempted to turn around halfway and go back home, there was a neighbor right behind me.

"Years later, one of those neighbors teased me after I became a doctor.

"She said, 'Yeah, I'm partly responsible for that, because I used to whip your butt up into the door of that school.' "

Scholarships, his mother's frugality and his own savings from waiting tables also got him in the door of Tougaloo College, then to Meharry Medical College in Nashville.

His dream was to become a pediatrician. After Meharry, during the Jim Crow era of the '60s, he applied to the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson.

He was the first African American to be accepted as a resident there.

"Dr. Blair Batson was head of the pediatrics department," said Shirley, who also practiced, briefly, in Vicksburg. "Years later, I asked him, 'Blair, how were you able to pull that off?'

"He said, 'Aaron, I just did it without asking anybody.' "

After his residency, Shirley's passion for improving health care for the poor took over his life. To that end, in the 1970s, he and Dr. James Anderson established the Jackson-Hinds Comprehensive Health Center, overcoming the opposition of politicians whose motivations were racial, Shirley said.

The physicians prevailed in part because of Shirley's persistence and empathy, said Dr. Freda Bush, a Jackson obstetrician who once worked with and for Shirley.

"Dr. Shirley sees things that are not as they should be, then he sets out to make them become. He instinctively knows the qualities in other people that he can call upon. They're inspired to help his vision become a reality."

Shirley's next vision was a one-stop facility for health and social-welfare needs: the Jackson Medical Mall.

It opened in 1998, in the vast spaces of a defunct shopping mall on Woodrow Wilson Avenue, offering immunizations, tuberculosis screenings and more in place of Nikes. A cooperative venture with UMC, it dispenses medical care to thousands.

Beyond that, Shirley volunteers hours of service to community health fairs and organizations that address issues such as affordable health care.

Still, he sees a gap in the health-care system that's as conspicuous as the empty spot where his childhood home once stood.

"There is a refusal to recognize that, as a society, we have an obligation to insure that unfortunate people have access to the basics," he said. "The current debate about Medicaid, for instance, is over whether we'll sustain this safety net at a level that would cause no harm. To even have the debate is troubling."

Still, he's able to master his occasional bouts of cynicism and despair, he said. Perhaps by recalling the swats on his bottom from a neighbor's hand. Or just by looking out the window at his fence.

"I built the columns out of bricks my father made," he said. "He used them for the fireplace in the house I grew up in.

"When the house was torn down I saved them."

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