



Wisdom was named the surgeon general of Michigan in 2003

Profiles in Leadership

Kimberlydawn Wisdom overcame obstacles; now, she helps her community do the same

As a successful physician executive at Henry Ford Health System, Kimberlydawn Wisdom, MD, has attracted the attention of governmental leaders far and wide. Jennifer Granholm, then governor of Michigan, named her as the state surgeon general in 2003, a post she held for eight years. More recently, President Obama appointed her to his Advisory Group on Prevention, Health Promotion and Integrative Public Health. But the path to a medical degree was one that Wisdom had to clear of a number of obstacles.

First and foremost was the era in which she grew up, a formidable boulder indeed.

“In the 1950s and ‘60s, there wasn’t a plethora of physicians of color,” notes Wisdom, Senior Vice President of Community Health & Equity and Chief Wellness Officer of Henry Ford Health System in Detroit and an assistant professor for the University of Michigan Medical Center. “In my junior year of high school, my guidance counselor said I should choose a profession that was more suited for my race. For her, saying ‘I want

to be a doctor’ was like someone saying, ‘I want to be an astronaut.’ She actually did want to ensure my success. But I think her sense was, ‘Let me bring you back down to something that’s manageable and achievable.’ “

Yet Wisdom’s mother, who grew up in the small community of Coatesville, Pa., did in fact have an African-American physician. And Wisdom became a caregiver for her mom at home as she dealt with severe migraines.

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“During my childhood, she spent a lot of time in bed and I was regularly bringing her aspirin or some other type of pain medication,” Wisdom says. “It was very impactful to me as a young child to watch her go through that. But on another level, I could bring her water, I could bring her comfort. That began to ignite this desire to consider how I could care for people long-term.”

She was exposed to a wonderful hospital atmosphere from a tonsillectomy as a child, and soon had dolls and bears lined up in

she crossed the stage to become an M.D., both her husband and parents celebrated together.

“They were all very proud,” she remembers. “It was a tremendous sense of accomplishment, and a tremendous sense of being thankful, because I couldn’t have done it without the support of family and without a strong spiritual grounding. It took a lot of prayer. I beat the odds in many respects.”

Despite her challenges, Wisdom says she had an idyllic childhood

“In part, I wanted to create a Mystic for the community in which I practiced, so they would have a safe place to grow up. So families could thrive. So people could reach their maximum potential, because they had a place where they felt they could achieve all that they were expected to achieve.”

But Wisdom has spent more than 30 years in Detroit at Henry Ford Health System – more than 20 as an emergency room physician – and she readily acknowledges that Detroit is worlds away from Mystic. As she saw the issues confronting her patients – violence, diabetes, obesity, teen pregnancy – she determined to take healthcare to them and not wait for them to come to her. Today, such goals are commonplace in any metro hospital, but back then her ideas were seen as unorthodox. Nonetheless, her bosses at Henry Ford told her to go for it.

“As an emergency medicine physician, the community comes to you in various states of disarray. I thought that, if I could go out and meet them where they are, I could have a greater impact,” she says. “When I look at many communities, so many people have not had the ability to realize their potential because they have made choices based on the choices they had available, not based on the best choices that would be ideal for them at any given time.”

So Wisdom started small, taking physicians, nurses and social workers out into the community,

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shoeboxes around her room, where she would tend to their medical needs. She graduated 20th in her high school class of 600, but her supportive parents weren’t so sure that marrying a young mechanical engineer was the best way to get through medical school. But when

growing up in Mystic, Conn., the town made semi-famous by Julia Roberts’ first movie, “Mystic Pizza.” Those experiences, she says, have shaped her career as she sought to give her patients and her community the opportunities she was afforded.

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setting up shop in a community center or a faith-based organization. With each endeavor, Wisdom received more funding as she slowly and quietly attempted to address health disparities in the African-American community.

She and the health system now have major grant funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to address child obesity reduction. Several foundations fund her work in attempting to reduce infant mortality in the Detroit area, a region that has one of the highest rates in the country. A faith-based program she designed received funding from the National Institutes of Health, and she serves on the president's group that advises his cabinet regarding the National Prevention Strategy, a wellness initiative created by U.S. Surgeon General Regina Benjamin.

The Ford system recently earned the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award, one of the highest honors for any industry, in terms of service excellence, and has established the Wellness Center of Excellence, called "Henry Ford LiveWell" for short, that focuses on preventative and lifestyle health.

It's a long way from dolls in shoeboxes, but Wisdom says that, if anything, her passion and excitement for healthcare have grown.

"Empowering people," she says. "That's what it's all about." **FG**

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