

Vanderbilt Medicine

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A selfless career

Vanderbilt University can thank Dr. David H. James Jr. for its only undefeated football season since 1922. Granted it wasn't all his doing; he played guard. Granted the team played only five games, against such powerhouse teams as Milligan and Carson-Newman. Granted it was 1943, and athletic activity was curtailed because of World War II.

But what he has achieved in his career will long be ranked high above what he did on the football field.

Thousands of families can thank James, MD'51, for bringing high-quality pediatric medical care to a low-income Memphis neighborhood. Scores of employees and medical students, including two sons who also became physicians, recall lessons learned at the Children and Youth Project clinic, which he directed for more than two decades.

"The clinic was unique. It was like an extended family," said Beverly Cox, a nurse who worked at the clinic for 11 years. "And it provided magnificent health care. The children there received as good or better health care than children who lived in affluent areas of the city."

The close-knit staff worked well together, she said, handling large patient loads. "We had days that were just horrendous. At the end of the day you were dead on your feet, but you felt good because you made a difference in someone's life."

David James' interest in working with children was sparked when he was required to work with Dr. Amos Christie the summer following his third year of medical

school. The pairing was one that would ultimately lead to the improvement of health care for many needy children in Memphis.

"The pediatric department was very impressive. There were good role models there. By the time I graduated from medical school, I knew that was what I wanted to do," James said.

Following a residency at St. Louis Children's Hospital in St. Louis, Mo., he moved to West Memphis, Ark., which is still his home, and went into private practice. In 1962, he joined the staff of the fledgling St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, where he participated in research on treatments for childhood leukemia and malignant solid tumors. Five years later, he became director of pediatric training at St. Joseph Hospital in Memphis. There he learned of a federal program to provide comprehensive health services to children in low-income areas.

"It looked like a natural," said James, in his unhurried, Southern manner. "The area around St. Joseph was low-income. I knew the children there weren't getting proper

health care."

With the help of St. Joseph and the local health department, he submitted a grant proposal. Then he walked the neighborhood, meeting with physicians, health care agencies and community organizations. The original grant documents include many letters written in support of the project. One from an ophthalmologist shows a fee schedule for his services: \$5 for an office visit, \$15 for a full exam. A letter from a realtor indicates clinic space could be rented for \$3.50 per square foot. The grant was approved, and in January of 1967, James opened the Children and Youth Project in a public housing development. The area served by the clinic was largely black and very poor, and it was a time of racial unrest. The next year, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would be shot during his visit to Memphis in support of the sanitation worker strike. In fact, the civil rights leader would be pronounced dead at St. Joseph Hospital.

Yet Dr. Virginia Gaylon, who worked at the clinic from 1968 to 1991, said she felt no racial tension. "The residents were very happy to have a clinic in their neighborhood," she said. "All of our workers were hired from the community, and many

stayed with us until our clinic closed. That's pretty remarkable. Many took college courses and improved themselves."

One of the racial issues of the late '60s, a hospital worker strike, precipitated a positive development for the clinic. Medical students and residents from University of Tennessee Memphis, who could not work in the city hospital, began rotating through the Children and Youth Project. The program helped staff the clinic and gave the students the rare experience of working in an inner-city community setting. It also signaled a stronger affiliation with UT, where James was an associate professor.

The greatest hurdle the clinic faced was in 1981, when a change in the distribution of federal grant money resulted in a drastic funding cut.

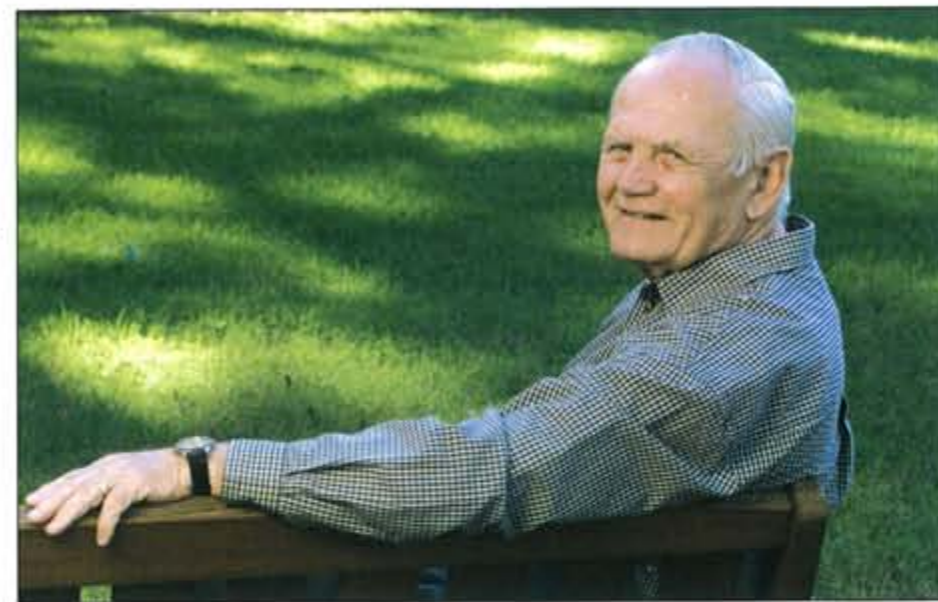
"That was a crisis," James said. "I didn't know whether we'd be able to survive or not."

James scrambled to piece together funding from public and private sources, taking advantage of Medicaid and getting small grants, as well as help from the community. He knew the landscape well from his days canvassing the neighborhood and from his own family legacy. His father and uncle — both VUSM graduates — had practiced in the same office in downtown Memphis for 56 years.

Despite his efforts, there were some cutbacks. "At one time, the staff had to go half-schedule, half-pay," Gaylon said. "Dr. James led us through it all. He was committed to health care for the poor, and he continued that theme throughout his career."

He also was committed to health education, which he believed would reduce the need for hospitalizations. Many children in the area were affected by preventable illness, such as anemia and lead poisoning. Physicians and health care workers taught mothers about the importance of immunization, proper nutrition and infant care.

Their focus on education resulted in a marked decrease in hospital admissions,



DR. DAVID JAMES JR.

from 178 the first year of operation to 80 until 1997. During the same period, patient visits increased from 2,000 to 3,500. In 1986, of 14,000 patient visits, there were only 54 hospitalizations.

These days, James and Ann, his wife of 48 years, take time to visit their large family, which includes 11 children, ages 26-46

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— Dr. Judy Wood

"It was what every physician and patient dreams of," said Dr. Judy Wood, associate professor of pediatrics at University of Tennessee Memphis, who worked at the clinic in the early '80s. "Patients could walk to the clinic, and people knew them. I think Dr. James knew the name of every person who came in there. David is one of the world's nicest people and an astute diagnostician. He cares about everybody — patients, staff, physicians. It's unusual to find a person like that."

Beginning in 1990, the clinic gradually became part of a county comprehensive health program for low-income patients. James retired from the university in 1993, and worked part-time in private practice

and 12 grandchildren. They travel some and have season tickets to the Memphis Redbirds baseball team — James threw out the first pitch at a game July 5. He and Ann volunteer at their church, deliver for Meals on Wheels and visit homebound friends.

His work has earned him many honors, including the Community Service Award in Medicine from the National Conference of Christians and Jews and the Outstanding Pediatric Clinical Teaching Award from the University of Tennessee.

Despite his accomplishments and accolades, his philosophy about service remains simple and selfless. He said of his work with the Children and Youth Project, "I knew that if we didn't do it, no one was going to do it." ●

by Elizabeth Rahe