



# A Better State of Health

The legacy of a landmark initiative to educate minority doctors in Mississippi

**A**s an African-American coming of age in the Mississippi Delta in the 1960s, Eddie Greene was not the most likely candidate for medical school. Minorities were largely underrepresented at the nation's top teaching hospitals. And racial tensions in Mississippi — and across the nation — were high.

Had Greene listened to them, the negative voices could have drowned out hope. But thanks to a progressive partnership that existed in the 1970s between Millsaps and the University of Mississippi Medical Center, the Belzoni native conquered the odds and graduated from medical school. A nephrologist who graduated from the University of Minnesota Medical School in 1982, Greene has gone on to become a member of the faculty of the world-renowned Mayo Medical School and Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

Greene (class of 1978) was among 35 Millsaps alumni who participated in a stirring celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Millsaps/UMC Pre-Medical Training Co-Operative in April 2002. Through the PMTC program, funded by a U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare initiative to increase minority enrollment in medical schools across the nation, 15

top students from disadvantaged areas of the state were selected each year to earn a Millsaps premed degree. Federal funds were used to create additional spots for those students at UMC, although participants were free to attend other graduate schools.

A landmark experiment, the intensive three-year curriculum at Millsaps was designed to instill in students the qualities they would need to succeed in medical school, fostering a sense of solidarity and camaraderie among the participants, training them in test-taking skills, and helping them to focus on academic areas where they most needed improvement.

"It gave us not only peer support but we also had support from Millsaps and those professors who were dedicated to proving that disadvantaged students from Mississippi, given the right tools, could develop into highly qualified students and professionals," Greene said, at the reunion on the Millsaps campus.

"It gave me a solid education both in liberal arts and the sciences, which prepared me not only for medical school but also for life beyond."

The PMTC reunion, which featured Mississippi Supreme Court

by **John Webb**

"They took 15 black students from all over Mississippi with the common goal of becoming a doctor. You had a family around you to learn with, laugh with, and play with."

Justice James E. Graves Jr. as the keynote speaker, was "an opportunity to reconnect with those who were around us when we were trying to make our vision become a reality," said the coordinator, Dr. Renita Cotton-Johnson (class of 1978). Complementing the inspirational spirit of the event was a performance at the banquet by the Millsaps Gospel Choir.

Cotton-Johnson said that the reunion was also held to "honor the vision" of those who initiated and implemented the PMTC program. To show their gratitude, PMTC alumni have contributed money toward an endowed scholarship for premed students, named for Millsaps chemistry professor Eugene Cain, who was an adviser, mentor, and friend to many PMTC students.

Alumni say that Cain was more than a good teacher; he was a guide who helped them navigate challenging curricula and challenging lives as minority premed students in the 1970s. "I have very fond memories of Dr. Cain," said Perry Wallace (class of 1979), a Meridian internist. "He was not only a teacher but a father figure and an adviser. He helped us integrate into the Millsaps community and college life in general."

The PMTC faculty "were outstanding role models in their professionalism and their ability to inspire students," Greene said. "They nurtured in us a sense of well-being in a very tough environment."

The PMTC program served as a watershed for Millsaps — creating a fresh sense of diversity among the students that continues to this day. "The other Millsaps students were lucky to have this group on campus," said Chrissy Wilson, who worked as a PMTC instructor and is now editor of the *Journal of Mississippi History*. "They were fresh, eager, hardworking. It just doesn't make sense to go to an integrated high school and then to a — seemingly — segregated college. Even though Millsaps was the most liberal college in the state, it was white. The students were lucky then to be going to a strong liberal arts college and to have black students as peers and friends."

Meanwhile, Cain so believed in the program that he went to Washington to argue for its exten-

sion. "Millsaps and the prestigious medical center across the street created a vehicle for students from almost anywhere in Mississippi to become physicians," Cain said. "It opened a door. Millsaps gained minority students, boosted enrollment, and kept bright students in Mississippi — many of whom had full scholarships to Ivy League schools across the country."

Not all of those students who entered Millsaps through the PMTC grant pursued careers in medicine. Some distinguished themselves in other ways. Wallace's brother Terry (class of 1979) entered Millsaps as a PMTC student but thanks to Millsaps' liberal arts environment was exposed to courses in politics and the law.

"Millsaps College offered me a broad range of academic experiences, and through the elective curriculum I found myself interested in political science and government," said Terry Wallace, an alumnus of the University of Mississippi School of Law and a Jackson city attorney.

The Wallace brothers said that the Millsaps initiative was the key to a future beyond Hollandale, their Delta home, and indeed most PMTC students would have lacked the resources or direction needed to pursue medical careers without the program. It sought not only to educate students from rural areas, but also to produce doctors who would ultimately return to medically underserved parts of the state.

A dentist in Merriam, Kansas, Tommy Rose (class of 1978) praised the initiative for "making a difference in the ratio of minority physicians, dentists and lawyers available to the community at large."

"It was the finest opportunity of its kind in the country," he said.

Minority communities in other states have benefited, as well. Before assuming a family practice in Fort Smith, Arkansas, Cotton-Johnson, who graduated from University Medical Center in 1982, was the medical director for a Choctaw clinic in Poteau, Oklahoma.

On the other hand, Dr. Janice Bacon (class of 1979), who graduated from UMC in 1983, is one of those alumni who stayed in rural Mississippi. She is the director of the G.A. Carmichael Family Health Center in Canton, where 80 percent of the patients are either on Medicaid or uninsured.

Bacon had initially resisted the PMTC program. "My parents were teachers and I had my sights set on that arena," Bacon said. But at a high school career night, Bacon met Peter Steward, who spearheaded the program as then-director of

UMC's minority student affairs office. "I wasn't convinced at first, but he convinced my mother that it was worthwhile, and he, my mother, and my high school counselor cornered me, and . . . well, it was the best decision I ever made."

Bacon said that she especially appreciated PMTC's year-round structure, which provided for summer sessions when the campus was quieter and less crowded. "After high school, while my friends were talking about their summer holidays, I was headed back to school," she recalled. "But I was able to arrive on campus and begin to get acclimated and to feel at home."

Of course, that didn't forestall the shock of her first biology class. "I remember that first day — Dr. McKeown scared me to death!" said Bacon, who was a biology major. "I remember his first question: 'How many of you are biology majors and how many think you are going to graduate?' But despite that tough facade, he always had our best interests at heart, and he was one who helped many of us make it through."

She said that her botany teacher, Robert Nevins, made the Pearl River his classroom, its flora his textbook. "I remember us canoeing down the Pearl and wondering what that would have to do with learning botany," Bacon said. "Although he taught in an unusual way, we learned so much."

Cotton-Johnson said that the program evolved from a faltering start to become a successful experiment in education. "In the first year there was a 50 percent attrition rate," she said. "But by the third year 75 percent of us went on to become doctors, dentists, and lawyers."

"These were uncharted waters at the time," said Dr. Johnnie Cummings (class of 1978), a Clarksdale internist who graduated from Meharry Medical College in Nashville in 1986. "When the program began, we were just bright young minds who were brought into this program not knowing where it was going to take us. Millsaps gave us a sense of what could be done. Now we come together after 25 years, with what we have learned and experienced, to see for ourselves what is and what can be. Now it is our responsibility to complete the cycle."

Citing the biblical story of the blind man who was given sight, Cummings said that "those of us who couldn't see at the time now have a clearer vision of the dream that could be made



Meet the Doctors  
A 25th anniversary gathering of  
PMTC alumni at their Millsaps reunion.

real. Now it's our turn to apply that sight to our lives, our people, and our nation."

PMTC brought together students who were bonded by their sense of purpose, said Dr. Chereese Ward-Washington (class of 1977), who graduated from UMC in 1981. "One thing that made a critical difference is that they took a group of 15 black students from all over the state of Mississippi with the common goal of becoming a doctor. You had a family around you to learn with, laugh with, and play with."

At other schools, she surmised, you might have absorbed the negative sense that "you were fighting an uphill battle." But at Millsaps, "you had the sense that you were going to make it. That this was where we were all going and we were going to get there."

"Millsaps contributed the largest number of African-American students to UMC of any undergraduate school during that period," said Ruth Gordon of UMC, who was the coordinator of the program and helped write the PMTC grant proposal for UMC's minority student affairs office.

And these students have been inspirational to other minority and disadvantaged youths, said Cotton-Johnson. "It is important for children who dream to see their dreams lived out in others like themselves," she said.

"They say, 'If they can do it, then I can do it, too.'"