SPEECH FOR

ANTHONY WATKINS

“STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF A SHADOW NO MORE”

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, patrons, family, friends and distinguished guests, it is with great pride and much appreciation that I stand here today to speak with you about the heritage of the African American Academic Surgeon. Heritage is not necessarily a word that has been known to be associated with our history, but times have changed. It’s time to look back, examine from where each one of us began, and really celebrate our accomplishments, mentors, and the path that was cleared for all of us. It’s time to make a practice of paying homage to the people and events that chipped away at the rock of resistance and denial and applaud them loudly for what has been accomplished in spite of the obstacles. Today we speak particularly of surgeons, and medicine, but each one of us has the inalienable right to know and share and own our history; to be proud of the sacrifices made throughout the decades, and use that inspiration as we tell the stories to strengthen and empower those that look up to us. It is time to acknowledge the shoulders upon which we stand and those shoulders are no longer in the shadows. We can look at statistics… and we will… we can examine history… we’ll do that too…. and we can observe the paths that each one of us have taken to be right here, right now, acknowledging the struggles that have made our considerable achievements that much more precious.

Edward Everett Hale once said, “In the name of Hippocrates, doctors have invented the most exquisite form of torture ever know to man: survival.” Tell that to an African American… and then tell that to an African American doctor! Survival is implanted in our DNA, even in the worst of times. It’s difficult and arduous enough to find the intelligence, intuition and determination to become a doctor even for the most privileged of people. Add to that the history, resistance and social and financial obstacles many of us have had to face and we can begin to comprehend what miraculous achievements our predecessors have accomplished.

The great Chinese warrior and philosopher Lao Tsu said, “…Perseverance is the foundation of all actions.” Can you even imagine what it must have been like for James McCune Smith, the first African American to earn a medical degree. Dr. Smith was the child of former slaves and was born in 1813 and raised in New York. It’s fascinating to think of what a curious, determined and focused young man he was. He studied at the African Free School in New York, but even there he realized that because of discrimination he really couldn’t go too far with his education. It’s really incredible to imagine the passion and purpose filling this person. He saw that he wouldn’t achieve his purpose in life on home turf so he managed to find his way to the University of Glasgow where he received his bachelor’s degree in 1835, a master’s degree in 1836, and his medical degree in 1837. At only twenty-four years old, he returned home to New York where his community offered him a hero’s welcome. He began his medical practice in lower Manhattan and is believed to have established the first pharmacy owned and operated by an African American. We can feel his authentic sense of integrity and purpose in his words, “The worst of our institutions, in its worst aspect, cannot keep down energy, truthfulness, and earnest struggle for the right.” Smith’s energy was seemingly never-ending. In addition to his medical contribution to the Free Negro Orphan Asylum, and his responsibilities with the pharmacy, he was a popular and engaging lecturer on the topic of slavery. He also wrote articles for antislavery publications. Dr. Smith continued his trailblazing career for twenty-five years, all the while sowing the seeds and building the foundation somewhat auspiciously for each one of us. He passed away in 1865, right around the time that Freedmen’s Hospital was being established in Washington DC.

Originally established in 1865 as the first hospital of its kind to offer medical treatment to former slaves, Freedmen’s Hospital eventually morphed into becoming a major establishment of medical support for the entire African American community in the area. One of its founding faculty members was Lieutenant Colonel Alexander T. Augusta, who was placed in charge making him the first African American Hospital Administrator in The United States. He led the hospital from 1863 to 1864 and is also believed to be the first African American faculty member of a medical school in US history. His tenure lasted from 1869 to 1877, and needless to say, his contributions continue to teach us and inspire us today. With every achievement, the light gets brighter and the foundation grows stronger. With every achievement the shadows have less of an opportunity to hide us or obstruct our collective and determined path.

Although Dr. Smith was a pioneer and seemingly unwitting prophet when he went off to Glasgow to study medicine in 1837, conditions still had not improved significantly even an entire generation later. Although there were some medical schools that were willing to accommodate African Americans like Freedmen’s which eventually became part of Howard University and Meharry Medical College in Tennessee, it was almost impossible for even the most determined and brilliant African American medical student to find an environment that would accept him to study, and so it was even more difficult-almost impossible, for practicing black physicians to find hospitals that would allow them to practice. When assessing man’s ability to overcome obstacles and endure struggles in order to be able to practice and serve, these two men are extraordinary examples of intelligence, energy and dedication.

Slowly but surely, the light of revolution and evolution in the medical community grew brighter, and as the African American community throughout the country found their way and their strength, more and more medical institutions, hospitals and medical societies were established to serve the growing African American population. Places like Provident Hospital and Training School in Chicago and Frederick Douglass Memorial Hospital and Training School in Philadelphia learned form the experience of their forebears and honed their skills and offerings to continue to contribute to the advancement of higher standards in the communities in which they were situated.

In 1895, the National Medical Association was formed to counteract the exclusionary policies of the American Medical Association and the organization is still functioning today acting as context and a voice for people to shine a light on issues of inequality in medicine. The NMA still serves to advocate for the needs of African American physicians throughout the country. Think about that: With all we’ve accomplished and for all of the distance we’ve fought and struggled and experienced, one hundred and seventy seven years have passed since James McCune Smith earned his medical degree and we **STILL** need to have an organization like the NMA advocate for our community!

George Washington Carver said, “No individual has any right to come into the world and go out of it without leaving behind him distinct and legitimate reasons for having passed through.” Carver himself provided a revolutionary point of view and offered an innovative point of view that continues to enhance and influence our lives even to this day, and there have been African American doctors and surgeons throughout our history that have made necessary and lasting contributions as well.

At the risk of being somewhat “corny,” I want to invoke a line from a movie of several years ago. “If you build it, they will come,” may have been the most enduring message from the movie, “Field of Dreams,” but I think it applies here today as I speak with all of you, except we have to realize in relationship to medicine and contemporary times, the Pioneering Hospitals and Clinics that were established to serve the African American community served an impassioned call for what must be done in order to keep us alive. As symbols and foundations of the need for change and acceptance for all in what was to become modern medicine, hospitals and medical schools like Freedmen’s, George W. Hubbard Hospital, Provident Hospital and Training School and Frederick Douglass Memorial Hospital and Training School all began with an urgent purpose, and that was to care for those that previously were left in those shadows and to provide education to those people who heard the call and needed to serve their community. It’s hard to even fathom the courage and determination it took for our forebears to find the way and blast through to realize the goals of establishing these hospitals and schools.

Daniel Hale Williams, MD, one of the founders of Provident Hospital, which, by the way, is considered to be the first interracial hospital in the US, is credited with performing the open-heart surgery. In 1893, James Cornish was brought to the hospital with a severe stab wound in his chest and upon examination, Williams was able to suture the pericardium, and even without the benefit of modern techniques or blood transfusions, the patient survived and went on to live for many more years. He founded Provident Hospital and Training School in 1891 as a response to the rampant discrimination of the times. The training school was established to serve those interns and nurses that were preparing to serve in the profession. Dr. Dan, as he was known by his patients, even while still practicing in Chicago, explored and employed the use of sterilization procedures thanks to his research on the work being done by Louis Pasteur and Joseph Lister in the field of germ transmission (**If you want to make a joke you can say**) I bet James Cornish was happy that Dr. Dan did prolific research!! (**Wait for the laugh**)