

MEDICAL HISTORY

FIRST BLACK RECIPIENT OF NEW YORK STATE MEDICAL SOCIETY AWARD: GERALD W. DEAS, MD, MPH

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After hearing Dr Gerald W. Deas read from his book, *I'd Rather Walk Barefoot Than to Have No Soul*, I was moved to write the following:

Read a poem Dr Deas
Tell the world if you can
What it means to be free
And be your own man

Read a poem Dr Deas
Make it hot or cold
For you'd rather walk barefoot
Than to lose your soul

Read a poem Dr Deas
About drugs and our youth
They need someone like you
To tell them the truth

Read a poem Dr Deas
If we loved and owed each other
Then there wouldn't be a need
For the word brother

Read a poem Dr Deas
Brothers, the message is overdue
For you might realize
There is something wrong with you

Read on poet
Read on Dr Deas

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Read another poem
If you please

Through the above verses, one can get some insight into the many interests of Deas, a medical scholar, social activist, lecturer, poet, playwright, composer, and philanthropist.

MEDICAL SCHOLAR

Deas' mother gave birth to him on April 15, 1931, in the midst of the Depression. It was during this period that most people, especially blacks, found life hard because of the scarcity of jobs and money. Deas was born in Bedford-Stuyvesant, a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. His parents were hard-working people when there was work to be found. Deas' father was a per diem worker at the post office for 15 years. His mother was a domestic, and she was known to "bust some suds in a tub" to help the family financially.

Deas' parents might have been financially poor, but they always provided food on the table. Deas stated:

The warmth of the kitchen was made even warmer with the look of my mom's face. I could never understand how this tired, worn woman could mask her face with such a radiant look. After always eating a nutritious breakfast, consisting of government oranges, raisins, cereal, and bread from the surplus flour, I would go off to Public School 70 preparing for that ultimate profession of medicine.

Deas went about the process of preparing for medicine by first completing 12 years of public school. He graduated from Boys' High School in 1944. Deas became aware of the existence of a local college by

delivering telephone books in the area surrounding the institution. It was after Deas saw the beautiful campus of Brooklyn College that he decided to enroll. Deas went to school full-time, and because of his family's poor financial state, he worked during the evenings. However, Deas' labor was not in vain. In 1948, Deas received his bachelor of science from Brooklyn College. Two years later, he received a master of arts from his alma mater. Deas wrote his thesis on the topic of amino acid. The research was entitled, "A Study of Amino Acid Transfer: The Uptake of L'Arginine by the Renal Cortex of Pyriodoxine Deficient Rats." Deas described his feelings in regard to the Brooklyn College experience by quoting a familiar phrase of Caesar. Deas (and Caesar) said: "Veni, vidi, vici," or, "I came, I saw, I conquered."

Deas not only conquered the rigorous academic requirements at Brooklyn College, but he also conquered the academic requirements at other institutions of higher learning, such as the University of Michigan, where he received his MPH degree and Downstate Medical College, where he received his MD degree.

Dr Deas recalls his struggle through Downstate Medical College. He stated, "I would have never completed medical school had it not been for my parents taking care of my oldest son, Gerald, and my wife, Beverly, working as a secretary in Manhattan." The education Dr Deas obtained at Downstate Medical College permitted him to practice medicine in New York State. Dr Deas worked as a resident physician at Kings County Hospital. However, in 1966, he started a medical practice in Queens, New York. In addition to his duties at Jamaica Hospital, which has the largest black professional staff in Queens, Dr Deas also served as an internist at Carter Community Health Center, which he helped organize to serve the black community of South Jamaica.

SOCIAL ACTIVIST

Almost from the first day that Dr Deas started practicing medicine at Kings County Hospital, he has been a champion of many worthwhile causes. Dr Deas' social activism had led some people to refer to him, jokingly, as a modern-day Don Quixote. One of the causes Dr Deas was involved in concerned the eating of laundry starch by black women.

He stated:

Whenever I ask a patient whether they eat starch, they always respond by telling me that they eat rice and

potatoes. I usually have to be more specific and ask them whether they eat "laundry starch," (Arco starch being the main brand ingested).

It is not known why certain people desire to eat this form of starch, but it is a fact that they do and usually by the handful. If this group of persons are questioned more closely they will also relate to you that they occasionally have eaten dirt and red clay.

The eating of starch is usually associated with females and begins during their nine months of pregnancy. Starch eating would not be a problem, if it didn't lead to iron deficiency anemia, otherwise known as "low blood, or tired blood." After eating this material for a period of time, a person may begin to complain of fatigue, tiredness, palpitation (fast heart beat), or dizziness.

Because of these symptoms, the starch eater may visit her local clinic and be given a tonic which may help her because it contains the iron which is lacking in the patient's diet.

It was partly due to such statements by Dr Deas that the Argo Starch Company started labeling containers, warning the public against internal use.

LECTURER

If Dr Deas' medical practice and campaign against black women eating laundry starch were not enough to keep him on the go, he also finds the time to lecture. Dr Deas lectures in many different settings. However, most of his lectures are given at schools. He was invited to Princeton, for example, in 1973, to address a group of students during Black Health Weekend. The invitation was extended to him by the Imhotep Society at Princeton University. The Imhotep Society was created to help improve health and medical care for blacks. This society was named after the Egyptian demigod called Imhotep whose name means, "He Who Cometh in Peace." Imhotep lived around 3000 BC.

Dr Deas also likes to lecture to school-aged children. He relates to children beautifully. Many young people see Dr Gerald W. Deas as an inspiration. For instance, in 1974, a fourth grader by the name of Margaret Conway wrote a letter to Dr Deas in response to a lecture he gave on sickle cell anemia. She wrote:

Dear Dr Deas: Your talk was fantastic. It was very interesting to me. I want to be a doctor more than anything else. I will read the (poetry) booklets you gave out until I can understand what every sentence means.

POET

The black literary world has been blessed with outstanding black male poets, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Countee Cullen, and Sterling Brown. The newest member to join this cadre of eminent men is Dr Gerald W. Deas. Like his predecessors, Dr Deas' poetry focuses on some of the everyday situations that confront black people. For example, in his poem "I Wanna Be My Own Man," he writes about a black man striving for manhood and dignity. He wrote:

I wanna be my own man
 Don't wanna be on loan man
 Can't stand the groan of man
 When I'm knockin' at his door
 Been through hell my friend
 Never knew there was an end
 That's why I could always grin
 Gettin' up off the floor

Dr Deas also appears to be quite sensitive to the concerns of the black woman. This sensitivity can be seen in his poem, "Something Bad Is Wrong With You." He put it this way:

Some black working men believe
 If they lay the bread on the table
 That his woman will be able
 To bear the burdens of the world
 Workingman, if you think this is true
 SOMETHING BAD IS WRONG WITH YOU

Some black fathers actually believe
 That when he has a pregnant wife
 This event ends her social life
 Because she needs rest
 Father, if you believe this is true
 SOMETHING BAD IS WRONG WITH YOU

In 1977, Gwendolyn Brooks, who received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1950, complimented Dr Deas' first book of poetry, *A New Breed I Sow the Seed*. Gwendolyn Brooks said that Dr Deas' book is "...rich with creative excitement!"

Dr Deas also authored other books of poetry. Among them are *Ten Little Niggers* (a book that reveals the negative manner in which blacks were frequently depicted in American literature) and *If You Can't Remember Please Don't Forget*. The latter book was reviewed in 1989 by Dr Pascal James Imperato, the editor of the *New York State Journal of Medicine*. Dr Imperato wrote¹:

This is a moving volume which serves as a vivid reminder of how admirable the practice of medicine can be. Dr Deas has linked visual imagery with his verse and in so doing has given all of us a view of not

only black heritage and values but also the physician-patient relationship. This book is highly recommended and will provide readers with pleasure while reminding them of the treasured values long established by family practitioners in this country.

PLAYWRIGHT

Dr Deas is as excellent a playwright as he is a poet. Some of the plays Dr Deas wrote are: "*Paper Bird*," "*Son of Man*," and "*Oh Oh! Obesity*." His work as a playwright is respected so highly that he was unanimously elected in 1980 to the Board of Directors of the Black Spectrum Theatre Company.

COMPOSER AND PHILANTHROPIST

Dr Deas also has written several songs, such as "*Soul Santa*," "*If There's An Answer, What Is the Question*," and "*A Black Child Who Can't Smile*." The last tune is unique because it deals with the suffering of little black children who have sickle cell anemia. The song, "*A Black Child Who Can't Smile*," was recorded by Brook Benton. He recorded this tune for the Atlantic Recording Corporation. Dr Deas donated all of the proceeds from the sales of the records to sickle cell anemia organizations dedicated to finding a cure for this disease.

CAREER AND AWARDS

Dr Deas is currently an associate professor in the Department of Preventive Medicine at State University of New York Health Science Center at Brooklyn, and a medical reporter for the "*McCreary Report*" on Channel 5 Fox TV, WNYM, WLIB Radio Station, and *Amsterdam News*. He was the first black medical columnist for the *New York Daily News*. His tenure at the newspaper was from 1990 to 1992.

Due to Dr Deas' wide range of talents and his contributions, he has been the recipient of many honors. Dr Deas received the Dr Frank L...Babbott Honorary Alumnus Memorial Award from the Alumni Association of the State University of the New York Downstate Medical Center (1982), the Citizenship Award from the Medical Society of the County of Queens (1982), and the President's Citizenship Award from the Medical Society of the State of New York (1983). He was the first black physician given this prestigious award, "in recognition of prolonged and distinguished service to the community in addition, and unrelated, to his professional practice." Furthermore, Dr Deas received the Commissioner's Special Citation from the Food and Drug Administration in 1985. He was cited "for educational/informational efforts in mak-

ing consumers aware of the dangers of ingesting laundry starch and getting industry to voluntarily put a warning label on this product.”

EPILOGUE

As a contemporary of Dr Deas, I see him slowly moving toward historical greatness, even though Dr Deas will be the first to tell you that this is not his intention. Furthermore, he believes that most socially active people are too involved with their work to think about the roles they’re playing in history. For example, Dr Deas said:

If one examines the professional careers of outstanding black medical doctors, such as Dr May Edward Chinn, who was the first black female doctor in Harlem; Dr Charles Richard Drew, who worked with blood plasma; and Dr William Montague Cobb, who

was a distinguished Professor of Anatomy at Howard University College of Medicine, they would see that these persons were more concerned with improving social and medical conditions than they were with earning a place in history.

Dr Gerald W. Deas contends that he, like his colleagues Dr Chinn, Dr Drew, and Dr Cobb, is not out for personal glory or out to be made into a hero. As Dr Deas aptly puts it:

Believe me humanity
I...AIN'T NO HERO
All I want to do is to suck
On the other breast of life.

Literature Cited

1. Imperato PJ. Family portraits from a family practice. *New York State Journal of Medicine*. June 1989;365.

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