

Breaking Barriers

Carl E. Dukes, M.D. | Alumni Profile

By Jo Lynn Curry

Nephrologist Carl E. Dukes, M.D., the first African-American internal medicine chief resident at UAB, came of age during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and was deeply influenced by the events of the time.

Born in 1949 in Chicago, Carl Dukes moved with his family to Atlanta when he was 11. "My family lived close to Atlanta University, which included Morehouse College and Spelman College, the premier educational institutions for African-Americans," Dukes says. "As a result, I was exposed to professors of mathematics, music, literature, and physics—basically the black intelligentsia. These were men and women who had received doctorates from top-tier universities like Harvard, MIT, and Berkeley. This exposure really reinforced my sense of confidence and purpose, so I never really thought of myself as being intellectually or culturally inferior."

Dukes says his worldview evolved dramatically in his early teens when he and his family began attending Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was the co-pastor with his father, Martin Luther King Sr. "I was 13, and I had the privilege of coming under the influence of the entire King family, including Dr. King. So I was just imbued with all of the philosophy that shaped the events of that time."

A Return to Regional Roots

After graduating from a segregated Atlanta high school in 1967, Dukes was accepted to Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., where he studied theoretical mathematics and took pre-med classes. In 1971, he was invited to attend the University of Rochester's School of Medicine and Dentistry. "That was an interesting experience, coming from the South," he says. "Rochester was so covertly racist, I really couldn't deal with it. People can say what they want about the South, but you don't have to play games as much. They either like you or they don't and then you move on from there."

In an interesting twist of fate, it was at Rochester that Dukes learned of a medical opportunity that would bring him full circle back to his Southern roots. "My chief of medicine, Dr. William Morgan, was really excited about what he described as a fantastic clinical program that was under the tutelage of one of his dear friends, Dr. **Thomas N. James**. You can imagine my surprise when he told me the program was located in Birmingham, Alabama, at UAB. After all, I had spent the past eight years trying to get north of the Mason-Dixon line."



Carl Dukes visiting with UAB internal medicine residents in November 2014.

The decision to come to UAB and be a member of the staff was "the best move I ever made," Dukes says. "It was a beautiful experience, and I learned so much. The clinical program was so strong and they trained you so well." He completed an internship in internal medicine in 1976 and an internal medicine residency in 1979.

Mentors like **Thomas E. Andreoli, M.D.**, **Stephen G. Rostand, M.D.**, and **Edwin A. Rutsky, M.D.**, who headed the nephrology program at UAB, convinced Dukes to specialize in the field. He recalls meeting Andreoli in "a very unflattering situation."

"I was an intern and not paying as close attention as I should have, which resulted in some electrolyte problems for a patient. Nothing life-threatening, but I was told that Dr. Andreoli would have to be consulted. Now this was like a train coming; his reputation preceded him. Except that I was still so ignorant and naive that I didn't even know I was in trouble."

"When Dr. Andreoli made his rounds, he asked, 'Do you have any idea what's going on?' I said, 'I don't, sir, because if I knew, I probably wouldn't have done that.' At that, my resident, who was standing behind him, gives me a look like 'you have just killed yourself.' Dr. Andreoli looks at me and he chuckles and says, 'Here is the first honest intern I've seen in a long time.' And he kind of winked at me."

Dukes points out that, although he arrived at UAB before the advent of highly sophisticated diagnostic equipment, he received superior clinical training. "I am of the Tinsley Harrison school, which means I can actually use my stethoscope," he says. "I know what a heart sounds like and I can do a physical diagnosis, which is what we had to do then. We didn't have CAT scans and so on, so we had to be very adept clinicians. And we were fortunate enough to have some of the best to learn from."

From UAB, Dukes went first to Houston and then to San Antonio, where he now operates a dialysis treatment center. "The training I received at UAB has kept me heads above other clinicians since I've been in practice. And my clinic in San Antonio has been very successful. I've been very blessed."

Dukes has translated his gratitude for the training he received into a commitment to help other young physicians, and particularly to advance the School of Medicine's efforts to train a physician workforce that reflects our increasingly diverse society. He recently made a philanthropic gift to support minority recruitment within UAB's internal medicine residency program, which will help more promising young physicians gain the skills that have served Dukes so well throughout his career.