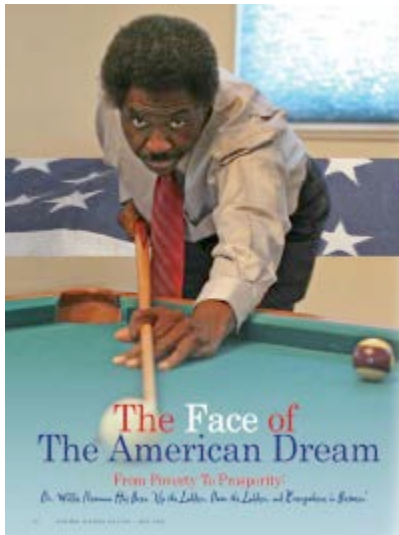


*The following article about Willie Newman, MD, JD, was written for the July, 2007 issue of **Central Florida Doctor** magazine by Heather Kinghorn.*

Born of humble beginnings, Willie Newman, M.D., J.D., knows the rags-to-riches story. He's lived it – and he's never forgotten it. It shapes his perceptions, his view of the world, and the way he practices medicine and lives life. From the time he was an adolescent, Dr. Newman faced adversity head-on, dispelled racial stereotypes, and overcame exceedingly great odds and obstacles to become one of the most respected, most trusted, most influential, and most sought-after OB/GYNs in Seminole County.

When others laughed at his aspirations, he chose to listen to the few who encouraged him. When racial myths threatened to prevent him from living his dream, he worked even harder to dispel them. From the time he was a boy, he knew where he was headed – and each day solidified his desire, furthered his drive.

Practicing obstetrics and gynecology in Seminole County since the early 1980s, Dr. Newman has played key roles in shaping the community's obstetric services, establishing pivotal programs in high schools, clinics, and jails, and he's become a hero and a friend to thousands of women and their families. He's delivered more than 10,000 babies, watching as they took their first breath, smiling as they entered the world.



But on March 21, 2007, Dr. Newman received the news that would cause him to leave the office, to take a hiatus from doing what he loved best. “That day,” he says, “is a day of infamy.” That day, he was diagnosed with cholangiocarcinoma – an extremely rare form of cancer affecting the biliary ducts inside the liver; it's estimated that less than 2,500 cases of cholangiocarcinoma occur in the United States each year. The prognosis for these patients tends to be poor – many aren't candidates for surgery, forcing them to face the reality that they may have less than six months left to live. But those who are candidates for surgery may get a second chance. Dr. Newman's still waiting to find out which side of the fence he lands in – but he's not too worried about it.

“Right now, I feel pretty darn good,” he says. “I say the serenity prayer – God grant me” the patience to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

In the beginning

Segregation was the law of the land. Born and raised in Sanford, Dr. Newman quickly learned which drinking fountains he could use, which hospital ward was for the “colored” patients, which restrooms he was allowed to use. As an African American, he couldn’t enter stores without an invitation from the owner, and he couldn’t eat in restaurants – in those days, African Americans only ordered take-out from a section in back. For Dr. Newman, though, the latter two restrictions didn’t really matter; born to poor, migrant farm workers, his big treat always came on Friday – the day his mother would bring him a box of Animal Crackers. It made all the hard work that week worth it.

Since the tender age of 7, Dr. Newman’s worked hard – delivering papers, working as a launderer, holding a position at a pool hall in a “less-than-stellar part of town,” picking oranges, and taking advantage of other odd jobs he could find.

“You do what you have to do,” he explains. “In poverty, there are lots of opportunities in agriculture. We called it ‘piecework.’ What you pick, you get paid for – in big families, that’s how you fed yourself. I was exposed to germicide, pesticide, you name it.”

Those were tough times, he recalls. He had a 10-digit family number with his welfare card, and his family relied on Medicaid and food stamps – for a while, he figured it was the norm. It made success seem impractical.

But throughout the years, in spite of the daily labor and struggles, Dr. Newman still managed to fit in education – his mother never let him forget: “education is the key.” It’s still his mantra. His mother had an eighth-grade education; his father had no formal schooling.

“Education is the backbone,” Dr. Newman says. “Reading and writing are commodities we take for granted. It made my choices easier – do you want this life or something else?” He wanted something else.

Inspirations

As a child, Dr. Newman knew the doctor’s office well. Suffering from asthma until age 12, Dr. Newman grew quite close to his family doctor, Edward Epstein, M.D., through multiple visits to his office and the emergency room. Over the years, Dr. Epstein served as a role model, a mentor, and a friend – eventually, his words and inspirations would bring Dr. Newman back home to Seminole County to serve the community that needed him so much.

Yet even during adolescence, Dr. Newman heard his calling, as key inspirations pointed him toward a career in medicine, specifically in obstetrics. He still recalls a teacher in elementary school who died during childbirth. Perhaps if she had better care, he thought, she may not have died.

And because of the poverty he knew too well, Dr. Newman knew he wanted a better life.

“Being a doctor was better than being an alcoholic or a day laborer – those were the things I was exposed to in my neighborhood,” he says. “I got to see very poor, non-influential people, and I got to see those of modest means, those who contributed to society. I chose all the things to get into because of the things I didn’t want to get into.”

He wanted to run from the incurables – things like cancer, which he considers somewhat ironic after his recent diagnosis. Combining obstetrics and gynecology, however, would result in mostly happy, smiling patients, trusting relationships, and positive outcomes, he believed.

And then his choice was solidified – twice, actually, in the same year.



It was during his undergraduate years at Florida State University. He remembers the vivid details of the defining moment in 1975 – the day he performed his first delivery. It was a surprise, really. He was doing an externship with a family physician and, one day, they headed to the hospital; Dr. Newman had no idea why. Once they arrived, they entered the delivery room.

“I’d never seen a delivery done before, never imagined what one would be like,” he remembers. He followed the physician’s lead, scrubbed up, went through some doors, and saw a lady positioned in stirrups, clearly in labor. “Words can’t describe my fear and terror at that moment!” he says.

So, with his mask half-off and hat tilted, Dr. Newman carefully followed the physician’s instructions, grasping the newborn, trying desperately not to drop it.

“I remember that moment – the smile extended beyond my mask. I remember the feeling – I was covered in Goosebumps. It was an amazing moment. I had to do this,” Dr. Newman recalls.

That same year, another experience cemented Dr. Newman’s aspirations. He went with a friend, who was attending Tulane Medical School, to the home of an obstetrician in New Orleans. The physician was hospitable, outgoing, and humorous – he seemed so

happy with his life, his family, his career. He served as a mentor for the day, greatly impacting Dr. Newman's decision to pursue obstetrics. But there was another thing that caught his eye, too.

"I saw his house," Dr. Newman explains. "My friend and I both looked at each other – 'we need to have this.' It was on the lake, one of the biggest houses I'd ever seen." It was a different world than the one he grew up in.

And back in his hometown, Dr. Newman continued to be inspired by local physicians who shared their stories of successes and overcoming odds. Dr. Epstein often related his story of being the only Jewish doctor at the hospital, encouraging an aspiring Dr. Newman to pursue his dream. Another local doctor, George Stark, M.D., pioneered to a great distance in Central Florida, fighting battles that would help pave the way for Dr. Newman and other African American physicians.

"This was a black, residency-trained internal medicine doctor in family practice," Dr. Newman says, referring to Dr. Stark. "And he couldn't use certain bathrooms in our hospitals. Seeing him and listening to his stories inspired me. As my life matured, I realized what a great distance he had gone."

Though there were some very inspiring and encouraging doctors, others tried to deter the young man's dreams. Dr. Newman remembers asking one physician what it was like to be a doctor. 'You've got to be smart and work really hard,' he replied – 'maybe you should be a preacher instead.'

"It was just more fuel to set the stage for the big fire to come," Dr. Newman says, as he turned every challenge into an opportunity. "I was very blessed. I knew that if you work harder and longer, you can make it happen."

A life dedicated to others

After graduating with honors from Tulane Medical School, Dr. Newman returned to his hometown, ready to serve the poor at Central Florida Community Clinic. Staffed by a family physician and pediatrician, the federally funded indigent clinic provided basic services. Though it offered a prenatal program, it was run by the family doctor and couldn't provide full OB/GYN care, often preventing women from receiving the specialized care they needed.



*"Being a doctor was better than being an alcoholic
or a day laborer — those were the things
I was exposed to in my neighborhood."*



"If you can't do something about problems you find, or get women intervention services, then you create unresolved health problems," Dr. Newman explains. Once he joined the clinic's team, he could get women into the healthcare system, identify and correct problems, and intervene when necessary. Intervention in obstetrics is key, he explains.

"When I got there, it allowed for continuity of care," he says. "It was important. People finally realized that if you want healthcare better, then you pay attention, identify, and do something."

But providing this continuity wasn't easy – even though the clinic was 25 blocks away from the hospital, Dr. Newman was responsible for delivering his patients' babies – and in those days, the hospital wouldn't allow certain procedures to be done outside its walls, such as inducing labor.

His career became his life. December 1984 especially stands out in his mind – he delivered nearly 70 babies that month. He specifically remembers going to the hospital one Saturday night – and leaving the next Sunday, eight days later.

"I literally lived there," Dr. Newman says. "It was the best of my times, but it takes a toll – you eat and sleep there, take care of patients, deal with problems. It consumes you; it is your life." Physicians dedicated to the profession, he says, sacrifice life and limb to care for patients.

"Dr. Newman did a lot of pioneering work to make sure underprivileged women had access to quality obstetric services," says Glen Davis, M.D., past president of the Seminole County Medical Society and current president of the Seminole County Medical Society Foundation. "He's always wanted to see healthcare and society advance and improve. He's set a model for the rest of us."

After nearly a year of rushing between the clinic and the hospital, Dr. Newman opened an office at Central Florida Regional Hospital, allowing him to see more patients – including those he served at the clinic – and use his time more effectively. But in the early 1990s, he made another move, as he received an invitation to help plan and build the obstetrics unit at South Seminole Hospital, eventually moving from Sanford to Longwood, where he's practiced since.

Compassion for the community

Dr. Newman's immeasurable compassion for others, especially those less fortunate, is evident in nearly every aspect of his life. From troubled teens to prisoners to families struggling just to get by, he reaches them all.

A while back, he collaborated with a local high school to reach pregnant teens, trying to break the continuous cycle – at the time, there was an 80 percent recidivism rate; if five teens were pregnant one year, four would become pregnant again in less than two years. Through the Teenage Parent Program, Dr. Newman worked with these young ladies, becoming involved with their education. The program didn't just get them through high school, he says, it prepared them for a functional life, eliminated or reduced risks of complications during pregnancy, helped guide them toward successful futures, and strived to prevent abuse – to the mother and to the child.

But, Dr. Newman says, funding comes and funding goes; eventually, the funding for this program went, but Dr. Newman's passion to help others remained strong.

During the late 1980s, as he met with his colleagues in obstetrics, he had this “crazy, revolutionary idea,” as he describes it, for them to see underprivileged women in their offices; eventually, he reasoned, the women would end up at the hospital to deliver their babies – why not ensure they received proper prenatal care to improve the outcomes? Everybody got a pretty good chuckle out of his idea, insisting it wouldn't work.

It took nearly three years to implement, but the Improved Pregnancy Outcome Program, working in partnership with the Seminole County Health Department, had results that spoke for themselves. Prior to implementing the program, the county ranked in the high 30s for infant mortality in the state – after one year of the program, it skyrocketed to number two.

Every obstetrician agreed to take at least one underprivileged woman as a patient, assuming care from her 20th week of pregnancy through delivery. Additionally, since there were no high-risk referral doctors available, Dr. Newman volunteered, tending to the women who faced the most challenges throughout their pregnancies. But he's quick to credit all others involved in the program, insisting it wasn't a one-man show, praising the work his colleagues continue, as the model is still in place.

Yet, there were still countless women who needed to be served – and Dr. Newman wasn't about to let them struggle without quality care. Specifically, he was passionate about serving women involved in the Department of Labor's Department of Vocational Rehabilitation – women who wanted to work but couldn't because of health problems or injuries. In the awful catch-22, these women couldn't get a job without proper healthcare; yet, without an employer, they didn't have health insurance. These, Dr. Newman says, are the people who are “near and dear” to his heart; for the past two decades, he's taken care of many of their gynecological and surgical problems to allow them to begin bettering their lives. The work is so satisfying that Dr. Newman's integrated several such programs into his practice, endeavors to serve the underprivileged.

“It’s my kind of medicine, what I like to do,” he says. “The diversity in my practice is unparalleled to others; I work with the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor. I identify well with both groups because I’ve been in both groups.” He’s served on a bank’s board of trustees, and he’s attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings to celebrate milestones with patients, sharing in their achievements. “I’ve been up the ladder, down the ladder, and everywhere in between. My view of the world is very different from others’.”

Newman Ridealongs

Perhaps that view – shaped by experiences, choices, education, and opportunities – trickles down to the troubled teens who, at their parents’ request, find themselves spending the day “in Dr. Newman’s life” during a Newman Ridealong.



What began as a few parents asking Dr. Newman to talk with their children – often, youth who seemed to be heading down the wrong path – mushroomed into something so much more. Their day begins at the hospital, as the youth see Dr. Newman in all his prestige, receiving his well-earned respect, shaking hands with colleagues, and walking out the door in his starch white doctor’s coat.

And then they take a drive to where it all started, in Dr. Newman’s old neighborhood, where, instead of shaking the hands of fellow physicians, he shakes the hands of alcoholics, stunning many of the teens who see the stark contrast between Dr. Newman’s worlds.

“Some of these kids were rudely awakened to how the world of poverty lives,” Dr. Newman says. “As they see sleeves of poverty, I weave in choices people made, why they live there and I don’t.”

They then move on to the next part of the trip – opportunity. They venture back to the hospital, drive past some properties Dr. Newman owns, and finally end up at his home, offering the youth a chance to sit in his sports cars. Throughout the day, Dr. Newman discusses the importance of wise decisions, of taking advantage of opportunities. For some, the message hit home; for some, the Newman Ridealong encouraged them to turn their lives around.

“No matter how busy I was or how important I thought I was, I hope I wasn’t too busy or too important to spend a little time,” he says. And according to his colleagues, Dr. Newman always had a minute, always made you feel special.

“He just engenders your admiration after talking with him for about two seconds,” says John Robertson, M.S., M.D., FACS, president of the Seminole County Medical Society and friend of Dr. Newman’s for 22 years. “He has a presence about him that few people do; he’s easy to like, easy to trust. He always has time for everybody.”

Learnin’ the law

Even so, Dr. Newman also found time to further his education. About 20 years ago, Dr. Newman ventured back to school – without setting a foot in the classroom. Taking the recommendation of an attorney from Virginia, he enrolled in a small law school in Louisiana that offered “mail-order degrees.” After a few years of hard, dedicated work, he earned his law degree – but he wasn’t satisfied with the extra initials.

“You’ve got to take the quiz – the Bar – to find out what you know,” he says. Unfortunately, as he was preparing to take the California Bar Exam in the early 1990s, he received a letter from the U.S. Justice Department informing him that the school had about its credentials. And, though the Federal Court ruled the degrees legitimate, the college lost its accreditation. To take the Bar, however, required a degree from an accredited institution.

Though Dr. Newman’s “big quiz” was postponed for a while, the unfinished business loomed in the back of his mind. When 2001 rolled around, he decided to re-address it. As Florida A&M was opening a new law school in 2002, Dr. Newman took a leave from medicine to plunge back into law.

“I went there [to Florida A&M] before the building was even built – I felt like a piece of history,” he says. “I truly embraced it.” He loved law school, actually, and found it incredibly fun.

Dr. Newman felt he needed a break from obstetrics; he had reached a point in his life when he began questioning his decisions. Medical malpractice was out of control, healthcare was going out of control – his legal studies took him away from it, letting him focus and “have fun.”

Even as he questioned the sacrifices he’d made – personally, for his community, to his own health – he soon learned how vital he truly was to the medical community. In his short hiatus, the changes in infant mortality and morbidity, in pregnancy complications – as well as some modifications in the hospital – made it very enticing for him to return. So he did.

As he finished law school, he returned to work at the hospital, studying for the Florida Bar Exam in between delivering babies. And his hard work paid off – he passed the Florida Bar in 2005, on his first try.

“You just admire someone who does that,” Dr. Robertson says. “Many people go back for an MBA, but to pass the Bar at the height of your medical career? That’s amazing.”

Since then, Dr. Newman's practiced both medicine and law, focusing his legal work primarily on contract, healthcare, and family law.

"In the best of times and in the worst of times, knowledge is key," he says.

The day of infamy

After he overcame obstacles and seized opportunities to become one of Seminole County's most inspiring physicians, Dr. Newman faced an even greater challenge on March 21, 2007 – the challenge to fight the cholangiocarcinoma he'd been diagnosed with.

"As a doctor, I understand more," he says. "It opened up so many questions about who all of us are in healthcare; it helps me more clearly define the patients I care for."

It's humbling, he says, to depend on the expertise of others to care for your own life, but the good thing about being a doctor is that "you know what you've got to do."

Unfortunately, the bad thing about being a doctor is "you know what you've got to do."

So he's taking it one step at a time. He's traveled to Gainesville a few times for surgeries and studies, and he's had others in Central Florida. Just over the past couple of months, he's begun chemotherapy. As he waits for the medicine to work, his oncologist recently told him to get back to work; Dr. Newman began seeing patients again June 11.

"Another chapter in my life is being written," he says. "I see my life not as a cancer victim but as a patient entrusting his life in the care of a physician."

As Dr. Newman begins another chapter, his colleagues have begun fundraising to establish a scholarship in Dr. Newman's name through the Seminole County Medical Society Foundation. It will eventually be awarded to a deserving Seminole County high school student interested in the field of medicine.

"Dr. Newman comes from a family of migrant workers – he knows what it's like to be poor, and he's never forgotten it," Dr. Robertson says. "We want to provide the same chance for a student to receive the education he's gotten – it's a way to keep his memory going." The Willie Newman Scholarship is currently receiving donations from physicians, nursing staff, and patients who have been touched by Dr. Newman's work and life.



And for now, Dr. Newman still has plenty to do, plenty of patients to help. And in the midst of it all, he's devoted to being a good husband and a proud father. He's led a pretty full life, he says happily, but he still hasn't "written the books, edited the columns, or ran for political office."

But for every woman he's helped, every baby he's delivered, every colleague he's counseled, and every friend he's made, Dr. Newman has led a life committed to helping others, making an immeasurable difference in the community and beyond.

**For more information on The Willie Newman Scholarship, including how to donate, visit www.scmsociety.com.*