

Tribute to Drs. Parker

Drs. James W. Parker, Sr. and Jr., and the Founding of the Parker Family Health Center. Red Bank, NJ, a small city of 12,000 located on the banks of the Navesink River in eastern Monmouth County, has long been home to a vibrant African-American neighborhood centered on the town's West Side. Perhaps the best known member of the West Side community was the "Kid from Red Bank," Count Basie, the celebrated jazz pianist and band leader, born on Mechanic Street in 1904.



Dr. Parker Senior

Dr. Parker Jr.

But, among the best-loved West Siders were two extraordinary African-American physicians, father and son — Dr. James Parker Sr. and Dr. James Parker Jr. — who together served the Red Bank community for over 80 years.

Dr. Parker Sr. was born in Aiken, South Carolina, in 1888. His parents — Stafford Parker and Josephine James Parker — had both been born in slavery. Their beginning did not hold back any of their children. James and his two brothers each completed a professional education to become, respectively, a physician, a dentist and a pharmacist.

A graduate of Howard University, James Sr., the physician, came to Red Bank in 1919, at the time of the influenza epidemic, and established his medical reputation treating flu victims. He cared for his patients in their homes, because none of the local hospitals would accept an African-American doctor on their staff. His son, Dr. James Parker Jr., recalled that his father never delivered a baby in a hospital during a medical practice that lasted from 1919 until his death in 1973.

Dr. Parker Jr., born in Red Bank in 1919, followed his father first to Howard University, where he distinguished himself as a student and an All-Conference center on the basketball team, and then into medicine. He opened his medical practice in his hometown in 1947, where he practiced until his retirement at the age of 82, with the only break his service in a front-line MASH unit in the US Army Medical Corps during the Korean War.

He lived his whole life in the same house at 175 Shrewsbury Avenue, next door to his medical office, and remained a member of the local AME Zion Church from his christening to his death in 2004. Four years earlier, he had shared his memories with a local historian. The West Side he recalled had been a mixed neighborhood, with only a few African-American families. Count Basie's aunt was his childhood babysitter. Some of the local schools were still segregated, although not the Red Bank schools he attended. He enjoyed the study of history — especially Black history, including the story of Pine Brook, a nearby community that was a stop on the Underground Railroad and a town founded by escaped slaves.

Some of his memories were not so positive. He remembered separating from his white classmates at the movie theater, as they sat downstairs and he climbed to the segregated balcony. When he and his sister, both piano students, wanted to attend a musical performance at a local theater, their father escorted them into the main part of the theater, refusing to let them sit in the segregated seats.

But Dr. Parker Jr., like his father before him, was best known for a medical practice that was open to all. He took care of generations of Red Bank residents, regardless of their background or ability to pay. He was renowned for opening his office doors at 5:00 AM so that his patients could see the doctor without missing work.

At his funeral in 2004, a former patient recounted that Dr. Parker had invited her to dinner for her birthday and taught her how to cook vegetables for a healthier diet. He was known for exhorting his young patients to continue their education — and he insisted that they speak grammatical English in his office. His colleagues at Riverview Medical Center, where he was finally admitted to practice in the 1950's, described him as the best diagnostician in Monmouth County. Another former patient remembered him as being like a father to her: "He took care of me, mind, body and soul."

When Dr. Parker Jr. — then 80 years old — began thinking about retiring from practice, community members began wondering who would take care of the patients who had depended on him for so long. At the time, in the late 1990's, the fragile health insurance net was showing signs of wear, as the number of the uninsured began to climb.

West Side community leaders decided to take action. Among them was another leading African-American, Dr. Donald Warner, the recently retired superintendent of the Red Bank Regional School District and a 20-year friend of Dr. Parker. Dr. Warner, who is an ordained minister and a published poet, went door-to-door, asking West Side residents whether they had health insurance.

His findings were attention-grabbing. Overall, 40 percent of West Side residents lacked health insurance. The worst off were members of a growing Latino community — 95 percent uninsured. Most of the uninsured were in working families, but employed in jobs that would not support increasingly costly health benefits.

Among those who paid attention to Donald Warner's survey was Dr. Eugene Cheslock, a local oncologist also thinking about retirement from active medical practice. His idea of retirement, however, was to start a free community clinic that would care for the uninsured with the help of medical volunteers.

Another local resident who paid attention was rock-and-roller Jon Bon Jovi. Early on, he and his wife, Dorothea, hosted a gala at their home that raised the funds for the construction of a permanent clinic building. Later, a local high school asked him to perform in a charity concert to benefit the clinic. He said yes, and the students raised \$60,000 for Parker's prescription medication fund. The concert, an acoustic performance, drew the attention of music-lovers all over the world and led to a feature about the Parker Center on ABC-TV's 20-20 news program.

The clinic envisioned by Gene Cheslock and Donald Warner, which would be named the Parker Family Health Center in honor of the two doctors, opened in a converted trailer parked in an empty lot on Shrewsbury Avenue, just down the street from Dr. Parker's office. Clinic staff saw three patients on that first night.

Seven years and over 45,000 patient visits later, the Parker Center, housed in a distinctly designed permanent building, offers a broad range of services: pre-employment and school physicals; child and adult immunizations, well-child care and children's dentistry; women's health care; diabetes management; a hypertension clinic; vision screening; social service referrals and assistance with insurance applications for eligible patients. A professional staff supports some 100 volunteers, including doctors, nurses, dentists and others, who donate 10,000 hours of service annually.

Today, the Parker Center serves as an initial health care access point, making it possible for uninsured patients to establish the routine relationship with a medical caregiver that insured patients enjoy with a primary physician. Like the primary physician, Parker provides referrals for specialty care, one of the most significant hurdles for the uninsured, through a network of specialists who volunteer regularly at the clinic, representing some 20 medical disciplines. Diagnostic testing is also available through Riverview Medical Center and other resources. Affordable prescription drugs—another costly hurdle for the uninsured—are filled either through pharmacy assistance programs for eligible patients or at three local drug stores that have agreed to fill prescriptions from the clinic formulary at negotiated prices.

Like the Drs. Parker, father and son, the clinic that bears their name sees anyone who does not have health insurance and has limited means to pay for care. Among the 8,000 clinic patients are many African-Americans who are long-time residents of Red Bank's West Side. Others include newer West-Siders from Latino neighborhoods, Portuguese-speaking members of a Brazilian community in nearby Long Branch, and anyone else without insurance from anywhere in Monmouth County.

At present, the Parker Center is busy six days a week and sees 10,000 patients a year. But numbers are only part of the story. Just as with the two doctors honored by the clinic's name, the individual patients' experiences tell the real story. A few of these stories follow:

A young man who needed a physical to seek employment as a school bus driver received a full examination at Parker, including a cardiac stress test and other lab work. He is now employed and insured through his job.

A man in his 60's, not yet eligible for Medicare, was discharged from the local hospital with a diagnosis of both diabetes and hypertension. With his condition closely monitored at Parker and the provision of all needed prescription drugs, he has not needed re-hospitalization, despite the severity of his condition.

A high school student came to the clinic complaining of chest discomfort. The volunteer doctor on duty diagnosed heart block and sent him directly to the hospital, where a pacemaker was implanted, allowing him to return to both studies and sports.

A workman in his thirties, under care in the diabetes management program, changed his diet and lost 25 pounds. With his blood sugar under control, he has been able to stop his insulin and remain on the job.

Parker Family Health Center
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