

# Leaving a Legacy

Veteran Physicians &  
Their Heartfelt Memories

BY MARCIA SWEARINGEN

**W**hat would it be like to look back at the end of your career and know that you helped change someone's life forever... and not just one life, but many over the years? Five veteran physicians from the Chattanooga area recently reflected on a lifetime of service and agreed to share some of their most memorable experiences with *HealthScope* magazine. Their stories show how a heart for caring can continue for a lifetime.



Dr. Minnie Vance with one of her six grandchildren



## Minnie Ratliff Vance, M.D.

Retired Pediatrician, Recognized by Erlanger Health System

Dr. Minnie Ratliff Vance, age 89, was one of the first female pediatricians in private practice in Chattanooga. She was also one of the first physicians to admit an African-American child to the regular floor of T.C. Thompson Children's Hospital after segregation was abolished. Growing up in a Methodist parsonage with seven siblings, she learned the values of hard work and service. Throughout her medical career spanning almost 60 years, she regularly served underinsured and uninsured children.

During Dr. Vance's education, her experiences treating sick children profoundly shaped the course of her career. She recalls her second year of residency at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta:

"They housed me in an old patient's room. It had a chipped iron bed, and I don't even remember if it had its own bath. I said, 'I can't live there!' So they put me on the top floor of the old nursing building right next door to the hospital. It was a big, open room with no air conditioning. But luckily it was on the sixth floor, so there was a breeze coming through the windows. Residents didn't get paid much in those days—I made \$40 a month working night and day taking care of sick kids from two counties. There was a pocket of inner city people around the hospital that hadn't gotten their children vaccinated, so there were a lot of terribly sick kids—diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough. We had an epidemic of Hepatitis A—400 cases! It felt so rewarding to save some of those children that were so sick. It just goes to show how important vaccina-

tions are to save children from dying. Kids die from flu! Babies die! It's so important to get vaccinations. I say you're crazy if you don't!"

She goes on to describe her move to Chattanooga, where she was on staff at T.C. Thompson Children's Hospital from July of 1952 until October of last year.

"When I came here, we had a lot of the 'least of these' right here in Chattanooga. It's delightful to deal with babies, seeing them grow strong and healthy and helping their parents not feel so frightened. I didn't make as much money, but that's all right. I wanted to be there to really be of some help. And when people want your help, that's a wonderful gift to you. It actually ends up being a shared experience. It helps us all grow."



*For those who have given so much,  
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**Harold Head, M.D.**

Retired Cardiothoracic Surgeon, Recognized by Parkridge Health System



Dr. Head at a da Vinci robot console

*tion gradually worsened. I stayed in the unit with her, and at 4:30 in the morning she arrested. I started doing miniature chest compressions and resuscitation. It seemed we were getting nowhere, but I persisted, in part because throughout this ordeal her eyes were open and she was looking at me. I finally gave her a drug which, at that time, we didn't know to give, but later became commonplace. And it worked. Her recovery was thereafter smooth. Seventeen years later, Christina graduated as valedictorian of her high school class—a straight-A student! I've talked to her since then, and that's extremely gratifying. But equally so is teaching a generation of surgical residents what they need to know in thoracic surgery to be a*

**Dr. Harold Head, age 67, spent much of his medical career in the military working as a cardiothoracic surgeon at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. In 1994, he and his family moved to Chattanooga where he became part of the only cardiothoracic surgery group in the city. Dr. Head's special areas of expertise are congenital heart surgery and surgical education. He collaborated with the residency in Surgery at the University of Tennessee Chattanooga unit to start a formal three-month rotation in thoracic surgery for residents in their fourth year of training. He received the teaching award for surgical subspecialties from the UT College of Medicine at Chattanooga on several occasions, and the award has now been named in his honor.**

**One of his most memorable experiences came in 1986:**

*"One morning at Valley Children's Hospital in Fresno, California, I operated on a*

*very sick two-month-old girl named Christina with a complex birth defect. As the evening in intensive care drew on, her condi-*

*successful general surgeon. That affects not only the lives of patients, but of future generations of healthcare providers."*



Dr. Head during his time in the military at Walter Reed Army Medical Center



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Dr. Coleman with a patient in Afghanistan

**Ronald Coleman, M.D.**  
Retired General Surgeon,  
Recognized by SkyRidge  
Medical Center

month to spend a week teaching surgery and performing surgeries in remote mission-type hospitals.

The following story from Honduras is an example of a time when Coleman was deeply impacted by a patient and his family.

Ronald Coleman, age 61, became interested in medicine while serving in the military as a Green Beret. With a gift for working with his hands, he went to medical school with the intent of becoming a general surgeon. After finishing his residency at the University of South Carolina, he practiced as a general surgeon with the Surgical Associates of Cleveland from 1983 to 2003.

Coleman has taken numerous medical trips to various parts of the world to teach surgery and perform surgeries. However, the country dearest to his heart is Honduras, where he traveled twice a year beginning in 1989. Now Coleman continues to travel to Honduras once a



Dr. Coleman in Afghanistan

*"I remember one little boy—about five years old—by the name of Oscar. He had a cancer of the hand about the size of a softball that was ulcerated and bleeding as well as a mass on his armpit. He had been given chemo for five months, and his hair was gone. It was obvious that he was completely miserable and the cancer was not getting better. His family was with him, and I sat down with them to talk about their options. They had been chasing the disease, but it was apparent that it wasn't going to be cured. I had to help them understand that he also had cancer in his lungs and wouldn't live beyond a few more years. We ended up amputating his hand and taking out the mass so we could offer Oscar and his family some comfort. After he underwent the surgeries and stopped chemo, he did very well. Two to three months later his hair was black and beautiful and he looked like he did when he was healthy. His sadness was gone, and he even played soccer. During those last few months, he and his family were at peace and he got to see his little brother born. Had there been no intervention, the family would have continued the chemotherapy and he would have died a miserable death. Now, they still call me and thank me for encouraging them to make that decision. Having the ability to walk with someone through that—supporting them through those decisions and encouraging them—is what means the most to me."*

Every day, we fill some very important shoes.



Left to right: Gary Bell, M.D.; Lisa Lowery-Smith, M.D.; William W. Blake, M.D.; Zack Catterton, M.D.; Amy Lombardo, N.N.P.  
Not pictured: Amy Kirk, M.D.

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**Paul Bradley, M.D.**

Retired General Surgeon, Recognized by Hamilton Health Care System



(left) Dr. Bradley exercises at the Cardiac Rehab in Bradley Wellness Center. (below) Dr. Bradley with his family at the opening of Bradley Wellness Center in 1986



Dr. Paul Bradley, age 91, began general practice at Hamilton Memorial Hospital in 1949. In 1954, he was instrumental in raising funds to buy property for the new Hamilton Medical Center. Because of his passion for preventive care, Bradley Wellness Center was named in his honor. Dr. Bradley also played a key role in establishing hospice care as part of Hamilton Health Care System. With his wife, Ann, he founded the Hamilton Medical Tumor Registry to track all cancer cases diagnosed and treated at the hospital.

**One of his most memorable experiences happened in Atlanta in 1945:**

*"I was a resident at Grady working in pediatric surgery. I got a call from the head administrator of the hospital, Frank Wilson. 'Paul,' he said, 'last weekend Dr. Elliott Scarborough and I were guests of Bob Woodruff, chairman of the board at Coca-Cola, at Ichauway Plantation in south Georgia. One of the workers walked up to us with a little boy scooting on his bottom. His knees were drawn up and his heels were touching his buttocks*

*because of burn scars that were starting to pull his knees back. I want Dr. Scarborough to admit him to your ward, and he'll come down and help you operate.' A ten-year-old African-American boy named Johnny Will Wright was dropped off. It was the first time he'd ever been to town, and he was alone in a 30-bed ward of a teaching hospital. One day, I said, 'Johnny, we got a new patient over there. I wonder what's wrong with her?' He piped up and said, 'aplastic anemia!' He'd been listening in on the rounds and was diagnosing everyone. We operated on him—cut all the scars out and got his knees stretched out. We put a skin*

*graft in the back, and it all took. I never saw him again, but I always wondered what happened to such a smart kid. Years later, I went to speak at a nurses' award ceremony, and I wanted them to know that you never know when something routine could be the most important thing in another person's life. So I called the historian at Coca-Cola in Atlanta to find out about Johnny Will Wright. Johnny Will Wright got well and worked for the preserve as master of the hounds until he finished school. Then he went to Detroit and worked in the automobile industry. Every summer he'd visit the folks back home."*

# Quality matters.



Hamilton recently received the 2011 Hospital of Distinction award from HealthGrades, the nation's leading independent healthcare ratings firm. This award, based on a detailed study of a hospital's clinical outcomes as reported to the federal government, ranks Hamilton among the **top 5 percent of hospitals in the U.S. for overall superior clinical excellence.**

Hamilton is grateful for the recognition and proud of this award, but **the real winners are our patients.**

- Ranked #4 in Georgia for **Coronary Interventional Procedures** in 2011
- Five-Star rated for **Coronary Interventional Procedures and Treatment of Heart Attack** in 2011
- Five-Star rated for **Treatment of Stroke** and ranked #7 in Georgia for the **Treatment of Stroke** in 2011
- Recipient of HealthGrades **Pulmonary Care Excellence Award** and ranked among the top 10% in the nation for **Overall Pulmonary Services** in 2011
- Recipient of HealthGrades **Critical Care Excellence Award** and ranked among the top 5% in the nation for **Critical Care** and also ranked #4 in Georgia for **Critical Care** in 2011
- Ranked among top 10% in the nation for **GI Medical Treatment** and ranked #4 in Georgia for **GI Medical Treatment** in 2011

## Quality matters.



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**Charles A. Portera Sr., M.D.**

Retired Gyn Oncologist, Recognized by Memorial Health Care System



Dr. Portera (right) with Dr. Felix N. Rutledge Jr., an internationally recognized pioneer of gynecologic oncology

Dr. Charles A. Portera Sr., age 73, practiced obstetrics and gynecology for 35 years at Memorial Hospital in Chattanooga. After spending a year at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Tx., Portera practiced in Chattanooga with a primary focus on gynecological oncology. With his wife and family, he developed the Bluff View Art District. He also helped develop The Women’s Center at Memorial Hospital and helps to maintain Memorial’s rooftop healing garden. For his contributions, he has received Memorial Hospital’s Humanitarian Award. His most

memorable experience was treating a young patient with cancer of the cervix:

*“She was probably in her early 30s when I first saw her as a patient. She presented with a very large and aggressive recurrence. Having previously received a full course of radiation therapy, her treatment would require a very demanding and aggressive surgical procedure. Because of the extensive size of her tumor, it was necessary for the final surgical margins to be free of disease.*

*“As we operated, we were elated to have negative results in the lymph nodes in the abdomen and pelvis. Our final sur-*



gical margins were also negative in all areas at the end of the operation. However, forty-eight to seventy-two hours later, reports came back showing an area of microscopic disease in one margin, putting her at high risk for recurrence.

*“Sitting down with her after the surgery, I told her that the prognosis was not good. I explained that ideally, we would like to give a total amount of radiation to that area. But because of her previous exposure, the amount given by the radiation oncologist would have to be limited. She said, “I do not want anymore treatment. I am going to pray and have a positive attitude about this.” Even though this was early in my practice, I had never at that point seen the confidence and security she exhibited about the major problem she was facing.*

*“Later, she moved out of town, and I did not hear from her. Approximately ten years later, she came back to me for care. Upon examination, this patient had no evidence of clinical or radiological recurrence, and to my knowledge, she still has not had a recurrence of her cancer. What I learned from being a part of her care is that anytime something like this occurs in your life, you — doctor or patient — are reminded that God has a plan for us all.”*

**A** cross the region, medical professionals continue to dedicate their time and talents to caring for others. These doctors embody the compassion and care offered by physicians throughout our area.

*Marcia Swearingen has lived in Chattanooga for 32 years. She has a Bachelor of Science degree in Journalism from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville and currently facilitates a Christian writing group for the Chattanooga Writers Guild. Marcia and her husband, Jim, have a grown daughter and live in Hixson.*



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*Symptoms may include, but are not limited to, the following:*

**SYMPTOMS**

- Burning Sensation in Chest
- Shortness of Breath
- Pressure/Squeezing Sensation in Chest
- Discomfort in One or Both Arms
- Cold Sweat
- Nausea
- Lightheadedness
- Chest Discomfort
- Back or Jaw Pain



**“What I learned is that anytime something like this occurs in your life, you — doctor or patient — are reminded that God has a plan for us all.”**

*- Dr. Charles A. Portera Sr.*