



by Chuck Brown

# A WELL-DESERVED HONOR

Michael Sorrell, M.D., first arrived at UNMC in 1955 as just another medical student.

He studied in North and South halls, now Poynter and Bennett, respectively. He walked the halls of University Hospital, the teaching site for students. Clarkson Hospital had just been built across the street and Swanson Hall served as Children's Hospital.

That's basically what the UNMC campus of 1955 shares in common with the medical center landscape of 2008.

But since his rather typical arrival in 1955 – Dr. Sorrell has left a fingerprint on this institution that is anything but ordinary. As a tribute to his contributions to UNMC, the state-of-the-art building that houses the UNMC College of Medicine now bears Dr. Sorrell's name.

"It's overwhelming because I'm really just a figurehead," he said of the new College of Medicine building being named the Michael F. Sorrell Center for Health Science Education. "The university and UNMC have both meant so much to me. It's just been exciting to be here to see this place change."

Dr. Sorrell graduated from the College of Medicine in 1959, and after serving as a general practitioner in Tecumseh, Neb., he returned to campus in 1966 to do a residency in internal medicine and later a fellowship in gastroenterology with legendary UNMC gastroenterologist Fred Paustian, M.D., '53.

After leaving campus again to do a one-year traineeship in cardiovascular medicine with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and a two-year NIH traineeship in hepatic disease and nutrition at the New Jersey College of Medicine and Dentistry, he returned for good in 1971 and joined the College of Medicine faculty.

And so began a tenure that would see UNMC transform into a major academic health sciences center.

After joining the UNMC faculty, Dr. Sorrell helped establish one of the world's leading liver transplant programs and also served in several key leadership positions at both UNMC and the VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System's Omaha Medical Center.

He served as chief of the section of gastroenterology-liver disease at the VA from 1973 to 1976 and as associate chief of staff/research from 1974 to 1982. He was named chairman of the UNMC Department of Internal Medicine in 1981, a post he held for 10 years.

While in this position, Dr. Sorrell showed his prowess as a recruiter. Today, you can hardly throw a rock on the UNMC campus without hitting one of Dr. Sorrell's recruits. Among those he recruited are:

- **John Gollan, M.D., Ph.D., dean of the College of Medicine;**
- **James Armitage, M.D., '73, professor in the department of internal medicine, former dean of the College of Medicine and one of the world's leading lymphoma experts;**

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- **Lynell Klassen, M.D., chairman of the department of internal medicine;**
- **Stephen Rennard, M.D., Larson Professor of Medicine in the UNMC Pulmonary and Critical Care Section and a leading expert in chronic obstructive pulmonary disease;**
- **Bud Shaw Jr., M.D., chairman of the department of surgery; and**
- **Jane Potter, M.D., professor and chief of the section of geriatrics and gerontology.**

Those he recruited were cut from the same cloth, in that, like Dr. Sorrell, they were strong clinicians who also wanted to teach and do research.

In 1981, Dr. Sorrell got Dr. Armitage to leave the University of Iowa and return to his native Nebraska after convincing him that he could build a world-class lymphoma program at UNMC.

"He has a vision and is able to articulate it very well," said Dr. Armitage, who would make Dr. Sorrell's vision a reality by establishing one of the world's foremost lymphoma programs at UNMC. "Dr. Sorrell is the reason I came here."

Aside from selling scientists on his vision for UNMC, Dr. Sorrell also had some recruiting tricks up his sleeve, Dr. Klassen said.

"He understood the secret of recruiting: If the applicant acted interested in coming to UNMC – start recruiting the spouse," Dr. Klassen said.

Such was the case with Dr. Gollan. In 2001, while recruiting Dr. Gollan from the University of Adelaide, South Australia, Dr. Sorrell placed a call to the Gollan home at 2 a.m. Outback time.

"As I picked up the phone, Mike said to me, 'please pass the phone to your wife,'" Dr. Gollan recalled.

Once Dr. Gollan's wife, Roseanne, got on the line, Dr. Sorrell reminded her that two of the couple's children actually lived in the United States and that they most certainly would love having their mother closer. UNMC, Dr. Sorrell told her, would allow that to happen.

"Roseanne was in tears by the time Mike was done talking with her and when she handed me the phone back, Mike said, 'OK my friend, I think we have this thing moving. Call me tomorrow and I'll offer you a job.'"

Or, in the case of husband and wife researchers – Joe Sisson, M.D., and Jennifer Larsen, M.D. – he recruited both spouses.

While the couple were each completing research fellowships with the NIH and weighing job offers from UNMC and the University of Iowa – Dr. Sorrell dropped by the couple's home in Bethesda, Md., to tell them why he thought they should come to UNMC.

"He was in town for another meeting, but he made the time to come to our house and take us out to eat," Dr. Sisson said. "He said, 'You guys pick a restaurant, price is not an issue.'"

The couple picked a pricey French place, Dr. Sisson said, which induced a slight sense of sticker shock for Dr. Sorrell. But the personal touch he showed impressed the couple.

"He sealed the deal right there in our living room," Dr. Sisson said. "After that, we decided to come to UNMC."

After he stepped down as chairman in 1991, Dr. Sorrell became medical director for the liver transplant program and chief of the section of gastroenterology/hepatology, a position he held until 2005.

As the Robert L. Grissom, M.D., Professor of Medicine, Dr. Sorrell continues to see a full load of patients.

In 2006, Omaha philanthropists Ruth and Bill Scott announced they would give a major gift to the university to help construct a new home for the UNMC College of Medicine. As part of the gift, they asked that the building be named in honor of their friend, Dr. Sorrell.

"Dr. Sorrell is dedicated to the medical center and has poured every ounce of his talent and energy into making it a better place," Bill Scott said at the time. "He embodies what academic medicine is all about – research, education and patient care."

Dr. Sorrell said he never could have fathomed the way his career would play but he's grateful it's gone as it has.

"It's absolutely amazing," Dr. Sorrell said. "I've just been so grateful to be here to watch and be part of the growth of this wonderful institution.

"This place has given me so much." ☺



## Mural by Nebraskan artist

Omaha native and fifth generation Nebraskan Stephen C. Roberts painted the 6 1/2-by-8 1/2-foot mural of Michael F. Sorrell, M.D., that hangs in the College of Medicine's new home. The mural features Dr. Sorrell and two medical students (one of whom is his granddaughter, Emily) at the bedside of a patient.

Artistic works by the 1976 graduate of the University of Nebraska at Omaha can be seen around the state from the Nebraska State Capitol, where eight 7-by-12-foot murals hang in the Memorial Chamber on the 14th floor, to the Norfolk Veterans Home and the Othmer Chemical Engineering Building at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.