

Passion for UNMC is Dr. Sorrell's legacy



When Michael Sorrell, M.D., talks about UNMC, you can hear the gratitude in his voice.

UNMC educated him. It gave him the chance to merge his passions of patient care, teaching and research –the three legs of the “academic medicine stool.” It also allowed him to grow professionally and personally. Eventually, it educated some of his children and grandchildren.

It let him become who he is – an academic physician whose tie to the institution fastens directly to his heart.

Dr. Sorrell’s link to UNMC was literally cemented in place when the medical center named its new, state-of-the-art College of Medicine building in his honor.

“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 so exciting to be here to see this place change.”

By all accounts -- except maybe his own -- Dr. Sorrell has been much more than an onlooker during UNMC’s metamorphosis into a powerful academic health science center. From becoming a world-class gastroenterologist, to the creation of one of the world’s top liver transplant programs to recruiting many of the medical center’s leading physician-scientists, Dr. Sorrell’s contributions to UNMC serve as ample payback for all that he feels the institution has given him.

Dr. Sorrell arrived on the UNMC campus in 1955 as a first-year medical student. Clarkson Hospital had just been constructed and Swanson Hall served as Children’s Hospital. That’s pretty much all the UNMC campus in 1955 had in common with the current landscape.

“We were basically a charity hospital and, as our charter said, we cared for ‘the worthy poor of the state of Nebraska,’ ” he said.

Research, Teaching a Lure

After receiving his medical degree in 1959, he headed to Tecumseh, Neb., and worked as a general practitioner until 1966. While he enjoyed his time in general practice, he also had a desire to do more.

“I really liked private practice and, in particular, the people I worked with and the patients I treated,” Dr. Sorrell said. “But I always felt that it wasn’t going to be enough to keep me stimulated for the rest of my career.” Dr. Sorrell always wanted to be an academic physician. And so in 1966, he came back to UNMC to do a residency in internal medicine and followed that with a fellowship in gastroenterology with Fred Paustian, M.D., a legendary UNMC physician and the state’s first specialty-trained gastroenterologist.

“I’ve always found the idea of research and advancing science to be incredibly exciting,” Dr. Sorrell said. “That was a large factor in my decision to come back to UNMC.” Following residency and fellowship, Dr. Sorrell completed 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 in Newark, N.J. He joined the UNMC faculty in 1971 as an assistant professor in internal medicine and was elevated to associate professor in 1973 and professor in 1976.

After returning to UNMC, he helped establish what would become one of the world's leading liver transplant programs while also serving in several key leadership positions at both UNMC and the VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System's Omaha Medical Center. For the VA, he served as chief of the section of gastroenterology-liver disease from 1973 to 1976 and as associate chief of staff/research from 1974 to 1982. In 1981, he was named chairman of the UNMC Department of Internal Medicine, a post he held for 10 years.

Special Flair for Recruiting

While in this position, Dr. Sorrell showed his prowess as a recruiter. You could hardly throw a rock on the UNMC campus without hitting someone Dr. Sorrell recruited. His list of recruits includes:

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

Dr. Rennard echoed Dr. Armitage's comments. "It was clear, at the time when he recruited me, that he had a clear vision of academic excellence and of how that could be achieved at Nebraska," Dr. Rennard said. "He was willing to recruit faculty who shared that vision with the promise that they would be given the freedom and support to pursue those goals. "The result was a dynamic faculty that pursued novel goals and helped establish the programs that have established Nebraska as a center of excellence."

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.

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 option.' " 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."

Teaching, Patients Keep him Busy

After stepping 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 teach and 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. "By putting Dr. Sorrell's name on the new education building, it will be a well deserved recognition for a man who has done so much to make UNMC a place that generates pride in all Nebraskans."

Scotts always looking to do good

When asked about the Scotts, Dr. Sorrell was long on compliments.

"Ruth and Bill have been my patients and friends for many years," Dr. Sorrell said. "They are among the most unassuming philanthropic people in the world. It would embarrass them to go into details, but they are always looking for ways to do good."

Looking back to 1955 when he first stepped foot on the UNMC campus as a medical student, Dr. Sorrell said he never could have fathomed the way his career would play out -- how he and this institution would become synonymous -- how one day, the building that houses the very medical school he attended would bear his name.

In an attempt to make sense of it, Dr. Sorrell said all he can be is humbled.

"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."