

## Black History Month: Allwyn H. Gatlin, MD

### Allwyn H. Gatlin, MD, 1918-2003

*By Emma Florio, Special Collections Library Assistant*

Allwyn Hugh Gatlin was born on November 30, 1918, in Greenville, Texas, to John Gatlin, a laborer, and Lula McCall Gatlin, a public school teacher. In 1940 he received his BS from Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, one of the oldest historically Black colleges west of the Mississippi. He received his MD in 1944 from Meharry Medical College in Nashville, which was founded in 1876 as the first medical school for Black students in the South. He interned at Provident Hospital in Chicago, another historically Black institution, and completed his residency in obstetrics and gynecology at Cook County Hospital. While in medical school, he enlisted in the Army Reserve and continued his military service in the Medical Corps of the Illinois National Guard through the 1950s.



Gatlin and his family moved permanently to the Chicago area in 1948 and settled in Evanston, where he went into private practice. He quickly became involved in hospitals and institutions in Evanston and Chicago. Shortly after arriving, he joined the Obstetrics and Gynecology Department at Evanston Community Hospital, where he became chief of the medical staff in 1954.<sup>1</sup> After completing a fellowship in obstetrics and gynecology at Northwestern University Medical School in 1953, he was appointed associate professor at the school, becoming one of the first Black faculty members at NUMS.<sup>2</sup> Through his association with the department, he became a member of the attending staff at the Chicago Maternity Center. Located on the city's Near West Side, the Center provided a program of home deliveries performed by Northwestern medical students, directed at the time by [Beatrice Tucker, MD](#). In 1962 Gatlin also became one of the first Black physicians to join the staff of Wesley Memorial Hospital, which would eventually merge with other hospitals and become Northwestern Memorial Hospital. *Image at left: Gatlin, circa 1973, courtesy of Northwestern Memorial Hospital Archives.*

In addition to his work as a doctor and professor, Gatlin was involved in the Evanston school system at a pivotal time in its history. In 1967 he ran for the board of the elementary school District 65, becoming its only Black member. Two years later he was elected president pro-tem of the board and then vice president, at a time when controversy was swirling around the firing of district superintendent Gregory C. Coffin. When Coffin was not rehired at the end of his contract, many of his supporters blamed opposition to his desegregation efforts which had begun in 1967. Gatlin's name often appeared in newspaper articles about the contentious town and board meetings in 1969, including one where he was quoted as saying, "Evanston for a long time has ignored the needs of the community. Let no man or group think he can stop the forward motion in this community."<sup>3</sup>

In 1973 Gatlin was again involved in an institution at a turning point in its history. In that year he was appointed as acting director of the Chicago Maternity Center, taking over from Beatrice Tucker. At the time of his appointment the board of the Center had begun discussing ending the Center's home delivery program due to a lack of funds from its parent institution Northwestern University Medical School, the growing medicalization of childbirth, and plans to build Prentice Women's Hospital. Groups like Women Act to Control Healthcare and the Chicago Women's Liberation Union protested this decision, even demanding Gatlin's resignation. Despite these protests, the Center ended its home delivery program in November

1973, only a few months after Gatlin's appointment as director. By the end of the 1970s the Center had been absorbed into the new Prentice Women's Hospital, which opened in 1975. Gatlin would go on to become the director of the Ambulatory Care Clinic at Prentice. *Image at right: Gatlin with John Sciarra, MD, chair of the OB/GYN department, and Beatrice Tucker, MD, former CMC director, holding Chicago Maternity Center Beatrice Tucker Awards given to students at Founders' Day 1983, Galter Library Special Collections.*

Gatlin remained involved in the wider medical community throughout his career. He was an active member of the Chicago Medical Society, the Illinois Medical Association, and the American Medical Association, and in 1977 and 1980 was chosen to serve on the AMA's Advisory Committee on Graduate Medical Education. He became a professor emeritus at Northwestern in 1984 and retired to Arizona, where he volunteered his services on local reservations with the Fellows in Service to Native Americans program of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. In 1986 he received the William Heath Byford Award, the highest honor given by Northwestern's Obstetrical and Gynecological Society. By 2000 he had moved to Massachusetts and died in Bolton, MA, on May 25, 2003.



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## Endnotes

1. Evanston Community Hospital was founded in 1914 as the Evanston Sanitarium and Training School by Northwestern graduate [Arthur Butler, MD](#), and his wife Isabella Garnett, MD, in their home. This hospital merged with the Community Hospital of Evanston in 1928.
2. [Edward Beasley, MD](#), class of 1923, was appointed instructor of pediatrics in 1935, and [Daniel Hale Williams, MD](#), class of 1883, was a demonstrator in anatomy at NUMS's predecessor Chicago Medical College in the 1880s.
3. David Thompson, "[Blacks Bar Talk by Evanston's Schools Chief.](#)" *Chicago Tribune*, October 20, 1969.
4. Robert McClory, "[Home birth program cut. Mothers lose medical fight.](#)" *Chicago Defender*, November 7, 1973.

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## Selected References

"[Dr. Gatlin promoted at Wesley Memorial.](#)" *Chicago Defender*, September 18, 1971.

"[Pioneers in Care: First African-American Physicians at Northwestern Medicine.](#)" *Northwestern Medicine*, February 12, 2019.

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