

# Samuel U. Rodgers

Physician

1917 - 1999

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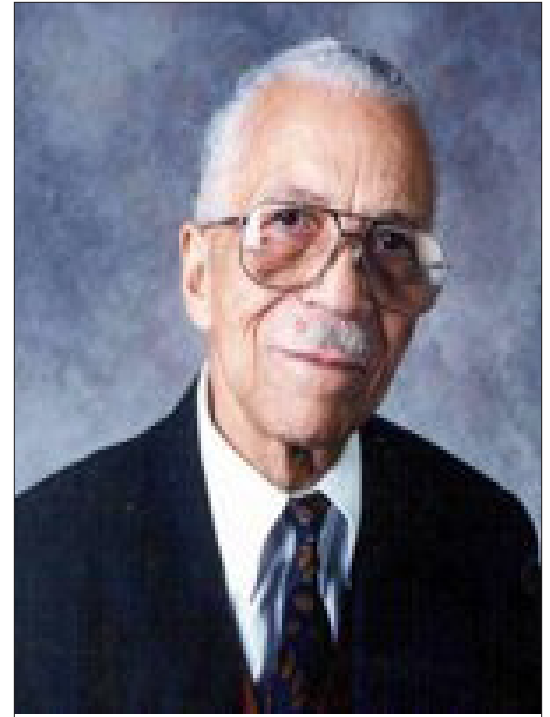
By Daniel Coleman

A gentle soul with the heart of an old-time country doctor, Samuel U. Rodgers once explained his motivations by observing that "to be poor is really tough, to be sick is really tough, but to be both, there's nothing worse." In dedicating his life to providing health care to Kansas City's less fortunate and uninsured, Dr. Rodgers not only healed countless individuals, but also broke color barriers in Kansas City's medical community, helped to integrate the city's hospital system, and became a pioneer in the community health center movement.

Samuel Rodgers was born August 10, 1917, in Anniston, Alabama, and found an early role model in his father, a small town doctor who never refused to treat poor patients even when they were unable to pay for his services. During his teens, Rodgers moved to Talladega with his two brothers in search of educational opportunities. He earned a bachelor's degree from Talladega College, after which he studied medicine at Howard University in Washington, D.C. At the time of Rodgers' graduation in 1942, Howard was one of only two African American medical schools in the United States.

Rodgers first came to Kansas City just after his graduation, to serve an internship at the segregated General Hospital #2, but departed a year later for a stint in the Army Medical Corps. His World War II service in Italy earned him a combat medical badge and the rank of Major, and for a time he worked in a diplomatic capacity for the National Board of Medical Examiners. His wartime travels also led him to his first wife, Elizabeth Pullam, with whom he returned to Kansas City in 1947.

Returning to General Hospital #2, Rodgers encountered inferior conditions, equipment and supplies. He was frustrated by a lack of specialization among minority doctors due to restrictions on training. He spoke out against these inequalities, participated in a partial work-stoppage at General Hospital #2, and, along with a coalition of doctors, black and white, agitated for expanded educational opportunities for hospital staff. Rodgers triumphed



and became only the fifth African American board-certified obstetrician/gynecologist in the nation, and his willingness to fight for positive change led to the eventual desegregation of Kansas City's hospital system.

In 1950, Rodgers and several colleagues established one of the first private practices of African American physicians in Kansas City. In subsequent years he delivered hundreds of babies, and he and wife Elizabeth had three of their own—2 daughters and a son. Rodgers held to the ideals of his father, who had not been “the biggest or richest doctor in town,” but who strove “to do what should be done to make life better for people”. In 1967, Rodgers received a Masters in Public Health from the University of Michigan, and a year later took the helm of the newly opened Wayne Miner Health Center at a much-reduced salary.

The clinic, located in a small office in the Wayne Miner housing project, was established to provide health care access to underserved patients in the urban core. It was the first organization of its kind in Kansas City, and grew under Rodgers' leadership from a small operation into a model of the community health center concept. A new, larger home for the center opened at 9<sup>th</sup> and Euclid in 1972, and its services grew to include outpatient care for adults and children, women's health specialization, extensive outreach programs, dentistry, substance abuse treatment, social services, and a pharmacy, all available to low income patients on a sliding fee scale. In 1988 the center was renamed after its leader, and by 1998, staff at the Samuel U. Rodgers Community Health Center, with an annual budget of nearly \$10 million, conducted nearly 140,000 patient visits per year.

Rodgers' first wife Elizabeth, who had worked with him to create and expand the center, died in 1985, and he later married Mamie Hughes, a former Jackson County legislator and one-time head of the Black Economic Union. For his lifetime of service, Dr. Rodgers received numerous honors, including the American Heart Association's Gold Heart Award, and the Southern Christian Leadership Council's President's Award. In 1978, the National Association of Community Health Centers established an award for excellence in Rodgers' name, and when he died at age 82 on December 19, 1999, one admirer called him “the Mother Teresa of Kansas City.” Today, the Samuel U. Rodgers Community Health Center the Center continues to provide health care to those whom its namesake considered his most important patients.

## Sources

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Photo: Courtesy of Samuel U. Rodgers Health Center

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