

Celebrating a Medical Center's Anniversary and an Emotional Reunion

By Steve Gilford

The rapid growth of defense industries on the West Coast following the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, set off one of the largest migrations in American history. Eager to fill a need for labor that had outgrown the local labor pool, tens of thousands who had struggled through the Depression years flooded into the states of Washington, Oregon, and California. Each person had his or her own story. One story helps illuminate the time and place when Kaiser Permanente was being born. Although the story began on a Texas sharecropper's farm 75 years ago, the final chapter was not written until the 60th Anniversary celebration, held last year, of the first Kaiser Permanente hospital.



Alfonzo Smith was born in Texarkana, Texas, and raised by his grandparents on a sharecropped farm. When Mr Smith was about ten years old, he was playing on his grandfather's mule wagon and slipped down into the traces. As he fell, he gashed his leg on a piece of steel used to hold the mules in place, thus ripping a piece of flesh from the leg.

Even though the wound wouldn't

heal, seeing a doctor was out of the question; even if his family could afford the fee, there were no doctors around. Leaving the farm and through a succession of jobs, he continued to bandage his leg to keep it clean and always had to live with the pain.

In early 1940, he left Fort Worth and joined what was already a growing flow of emigrants from parts of America with high unem-

ployment to "The Golden State," where the jobs were. Although he had been doing heavy work for more than ten years, the Army looked at the ulcer on his leg and classified him as 4-F, the lowest rating. He was able to get a job on a railroad track maintenance crew, working for the Western Pacific Railway in the Sacramento area, despite his weakened leg and the pain. Even in the hot California Central Valley summer, few knew of the constant throbbing pain from the ulcer he kept hidden under homemade bandages.

Cooler weather and the chance for better pay drew Mr Smith to the San Francisco Bay Area. He'd heard that the Kaiser Shipyards were hiring and that African Americans could get jobs there.

After Mr Smith had established himself in his new job on a cleanup crew in Yard Two, he decided to see if the Permanente Health Plan could do anything for his ulcerated leg. He was referred

Photo by Tom Debley



Mr Smith shares stories with Dr Pearl while looking at a photograph of the old wartime Oakland hospital in the KP newspaper.

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to a dermatologist at the Oakland hospital who sent him to a surgeon.

"My eyes opened wide when he said he could take care of it, because it had been a problem for such a long time." With the newly improved blood supply, the ulcer that hadn't healed

in all those years soon vanished.

I asked Mr Smith if he remembered the name of the doctor who had done the surgery. Without the slightest hesitation he answered, "Dr Grant." When I was surprised that he remembered the name so clearly, Mr Smith explained, "He was such a wonderful person. I had never really seen a white person treat a black person so well."

Mr Smith regretted that he had never had the opportunity to tell Dr Grant how much he appreciated the treatment he'd received and what a difference it had made in his life.

In late September in a park across from the Oakland medical center, in a large tent filled with music, good food, and a crowd of past and present Kaiser Permanente employees celebrating 60 years of medical care, the two men were reunited. They hugged and laughed together. That day, Mr Smith also met and shared his story with another sur-

geon, Robert Pearl, MD, now TPMG Medical Director. As they looked at photographs of the original hospital, Mr Smith pointed to a window on the first floor and said to Dr Grant, "Your office was right there."

"You're right," said Dr Grant, smiling broadly, "That was it."

Another Permanente physician standing nearby said incredulously, "You can remember where your office was?" "I ought to," Dr Grant replied, "I was there for 40 years."

Meeting again brought up so many pleasant memories for both men that they found themselves holding onto each other's hands as they reminisced about their shared experiences nearly 60 years before. At that time, Dr Sidney Garfield had just founded the medical care program and was determined to make the care as personal as possible. The story of Donald Grant, MD, and Al Smith is an indication that he succeeded. ❖

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Photo by Tom Debley



Mr Smith and Dr Grant meet again.

A Thankful Heart

A thankful heart is the parent of all virtues.

Cicero, c 106-43 BC, orator, lawyer, politician, and philosopher