

Narrator: Welcome to UMC.org Profiles, where each month, we share the spiritual journey of a United Methodist.

This month on UMC.org Profiles, Dr. Joycelyn Elders, former Surgeon General of the United States, shares her faith story.

The daughter of an Arkansas sharecropper, Ms. Elders was the first African American to serve as Surgeon General. In this position, she argued the case for universal health coverage, and was a strong advocate for comprehensive health education, including sex education in schools.

Elders: I was born in very rural, Southwest Arkansas on a small tenet farm. My parents were what you call sharecroppers. That is that we lived on somebody else's farm, usually a rundown house, and you worked all year and you took a share of the crops. We didn't have running water, we didn't have electricity, we used wood burning fireplaces, kerosene lamps to read and study by. There were eight of us.

My mother wanted to make sure that we got what she considered a good education but a good education to my mom was finishing high school. She always told us "if you want to get out of the cotton patch, you've got to get something in your head." We went to a one-room schoolhouse with one teacher that taught from the first through the eighth grades, which was really about as high as you went at that time.

I graduated from high school. I had no idea about college, I didn't even know about college. The night of our graduation, there was this man from Philander and he was giving the valedictorian of the class a scholarship. It was from the United Methodist Women. So, the United Methodist Women gave me the scholarship, they got me out of the cotton patch and I will always feel very, very grateful for that and feel that I owe so much to young women because of the shoulders that the United Methodist Women gave me to stand on to get me to Philander Smith College. We didn't even have bus fare and it was \$3.43. I didn't know anything about applying or anything. My sisters and brothers picked cotton to earn the \$3.43 to get bus fare to go to Little Rock. I remember so

clearly my brother Chester, who's a minister now in the United Methodist Church, looking up at me with his great big eyes, he was about five years old at the time, and asking "Do we have enough yet?"—not in a bad way or anything, he was just very tired and we had all worked very hard and he just wanted to know if we had enough for my bus fare so we could go home.

... Philander Smith served the most important purpose any school could serve in providing a college education for black people, regardless of income at that time because there were no other places to go. They worked very hard not only to prepare us for a profession or to prepare us to be teachers or whatever we were going to be, but the most important thing they prepared us for was to be decent men and women.

The thing that made me think about going into medicine was when I was at Philander Smith College and during one of our chapel programs, a Dr. Edith Erbee Jones (?), who happens to be a black woman and the first black student to attend the University of Arkansas School of Medicine, came to Philander to speak to one of our chapel programs. She talked about the difference between the high roads and the low. She said "In between on the misty paths, the rest walk to and fro." As I was listening to Dr. Jones, I want you to know I was completely mesmerized. From that day forward, all I could think of was that I wanted to be just like her.

When I finished Philander I didn't have the money or anything to go to medical school so I joined the army and when I was at the army recruiting office, they were looking for young women who had finished college to go into the Women's Medical Specialist Corp. The recruiter asked me if I thought I'd like to be a physical therapist and that just sounded wonderful.

After the military, I went to the University of Arkansas School of Medicine here in Little Rock and for me, medical school was very tough. I'd like to say it was a breeze. It was not a breeze. I had to work very hard. There was never any question that I was going to make it. It was just that I had to work very hard.

I was the only woman to graduate in my medical school class in 1960.

I had left the South once before when my parents went to California to work in the shipyards. That was the only time I had been out of my backyard before. Again, it was really wonderful being an intern, a real doctor at the University of Minnesota. It was considered one of the very best internships in the entire country at that time. You have to remember that when I was a senior medical student, I met this wonderful, wonderful man that I've spent the past 45 years with. I'd only known him for two months, I married him but I still went to Minneapolis.

After my internship, I went back to the University of Arkansas and spent two years as a resident and then became the chief resident.

... I was a black resident in a predominantly southern, white medical school that did not even allow me as a black medical student to eat lunch in the dining room with the other white students. When we graduated, the Little Rock Country Club put on a great big dinner for all the seniors but they could not have the black medical students, the three black medical students, to go. Their peace offering was \$30 to pay for us to go out to dinner. I don't think any of us took it as poor as we were.

I'll never forget being the chief resident you get all the incoming calls. There was a doctor from over in the Delta who was telling me that he had a patient that he needed to send up to me and he was telling me the symptoms and that he needed to send him up to the medical center. He said "Well doctor I'll just tell you, they're just good 'ol cotton patch niggers." Well, I had to bite my tongue and go ahead on.

I had come too far to let any words that anybody could say get in the way of what I wanted to do.

After being on the University faculty from 1963 until 1986—so we're talking about twenty plus years I'd been on the faculty doing teaching and research, loving every minute—the Governor called me and asked if I would consider being the Director of the Health Department. I have to admit that being a full

professor at the University, I wasn't really very excited about giving up a full professorship to be Director of the Health Department so I kind of said that.

Well, he called me back about three weeks later, late at night. Everybody who knows me knows I go to bed at 6 o'clock. He said "I got it all done, will you take it?" I thought about it for a minute and I said "Governor, I told you I would didn't I?" He said "Yes you did." I said "Well I don't want to lie."

Let me tell you, that was perhaps the most important call I ever got because I loved being the Health Director for the State of Arkansas.

I knew how to take care of the patient's illness that was in front of me but I didn't know how to make a difference in health care for the masses and that's what I learned at the health department.

In late 1993, the major opportunity that I was given actually in December, 1992, President Bill Clinton, no longer Governor Clinton but now President Bill Clinton, asked if I would come to Washington to be the Surgeon General.

I decided that if I was going to Washington, I was going to *do* the job. I felt very strongly and I wasn't going to let anything stand in my way of getting that done. I didn't go to be the President's Surgeon General. I didn't go to be the Congress' Surgeon General. I went to be the people's Surgeon General and I fought very strongly.

When you're in Washington, I guess every word you say is measured and mentored and somebody is ready to tear into you and tear you apart. Well, I didn't really understand all of that and I didn't go to Washington to measure and meter out my responses.

... I had been asked to give a talk which was telecast to the world—Africa and other countries—at the U.N. After the talk, a person in the audience, again a psychiatrist, got up and asked a question.

He wanted to know about masturbation. I said “Well, masturbation does not cause hair to grow on your hands, does not cause you to go crazy, does not cause you to go blind, it’s never given anybody a sexually transmitted disease, and you always know that you’re having sex with somebody you love.” Well of course, everybody went crazy and then he further asked if I felt that we should teach about masturbation. It got out in the media that I said we should teach how to masturbate but my response was “Nobody needs to teach anybody how to masturbate.

... well it was ten days later—when I was called in by the Secretary to ask me if I said anything about masturbation at the U.N. conference, I couldn’t even—I thought so little about it I really didn’t remember at the time. I said, “Oh I don’t know, I might have.” It didn’t even make my heart skip a beat or anything. Well then she said “I don’t know whether we can get you out of this this time.” Well I didn’t know what they were getting me out of. Well about an hour later, Mr. Pinnetta called me and told me that he wanted my resignation on his desk by 2:30. Well I told him I was not going to resign, not until I talked with the President. Well he told me that the President didn’t have time to talk to me and he was in Florida. I said, “Well, I’m not going to resign until I talk with the President.” Well, about an hour or two later the President called me and he told me “Joycelyn, we can’t have anymore of this and I want your resignation on Pinnetta’s desk this afternoon.”

I guess I never really felt at all upset with the President. I was disappointed that he, if you will—I felt preyed to them but I felt that he was doing what he needed to do for his presidency.

When I returned to Arkansas, obviously I returned to my job at the University of Arkansas School of Medicine as a professor of pediatric endocrinology. I was there until 1998 when I retired. During that time, I did a lot of speaking engagements all over the country and I wrote a book—*Joycelyn Elders, M.D.: From Sharecroppers Daughter to Surgeon General*. I have been very busy with lots of speaking, lots of writing and talking.

... I think the one thing that I have always felt so strongly about is that there is a power above that's stronger than anything and that He would let absolutely nothing happen to me that I couldn't handle and he would not let anything happen to me if it was not to make it better—I may not understand it all the time, but God knows best. Not only do I say that, I believe every word of it, even when I was dealing with the crisis of my son involved with drug addiction; even when I was dealing with the loss of my brother, the veterinarian who lived here in North Little Rock; even when my sister who was on assignment in South Carolina with *National Geographic* was killed in car accident.

I feel that He left me here and there's something that He has that I must do. I'm not quite sure I know what it is yet but the thing I want to get done before I leave this earth, and I feel that God's going to help me do it or make sure that it happens, is that I want all children to have the opportunity for comprehensive health education, for this to be in schools, and I want us to have access to healthcare for all children and I feel the only place that we can do that, to make sure that all children have primary, preventive healthcare, is to provide it at schools. Our schools are there, our children are there, the space is there and it makes absolutely no sense for this rich country to deny access to good health and a good education to the most valuable resource that it has.

Narrator: Our thanks to Dr. Elders for sharing her faith story with us.

This month's profile was produced by Matt Carlisle; interview by Tom McAnally; editor was Lane Denson. I'm Hilly Hicks and Profiles is brought to you by UMC.org, the official online ministry of The United Methodist Church, a ministry of United Methodist Communications.