

J. Kevin Dorsey, M.D., Ph.D., didn't set out to be dean. In fact, he didn't even set out to become a physician, instead envisioning a rewarding career as a researcher.

But SIU School of Medicine changed the course of Dr. Dorsey's life, and now, Dean Dorsey is the leader of the medical school.

DEAN DORSEY

Here, he's done it all — he's been a researcher, a medical student, an educator, a physician, interim dean, and finally, the medical school's third dean, and SIU's first dean to hold a medical degree from this institution.

After a nationwide search, the medical school chose one of its own to hold its highest position. "He has a fine vision, great energy, integrity and commitment to research," said SIU Carbondale Chancellor Walter Wendler, Ph.D., at a school-wide announcement of the appointment. "He will serve the School well and clearly address the vision of SIU."

Slight, softspoken, with gentle eyes and a modest smile, Dr. Dorsey breathes a kind of unaffectedness and friendliness that reflects his warmth and sincerity. "I'm a collaborative kind of person," he says. "I know I don't have all the answers; I have an idea, and I want to keep focus on what's best for the university. I think of myself as faculty first — I really do — a person who teaches and practices medicine."

At the announcement before the School, Dr. Dorsey thanked the School of Medicine employees for their efforts. "The support I've gotten has been unbelievable. I could not begin to do this without you. I will need your support in spades." As medical school staff and students congratulated Dr. Dorsey, he hugged many, a sign of his great affection for the people of the university, and the affection the School has for him.

Collaboration is the heart of Dr. Dorsey's message, which he illustrates with a story showing that employees like Security Chief Harold Tengler reflect the spirit of the university. "One day, a patient came to the security door [on the north side of campus] looking for the Baylis Building [on the south side of campus]."

PROFILE



PROFILE



“I thi
first.
the te

Harold not only drove the patient to the right building, but also handed the patient his card and said, ‘Call me when you’re done and I’ll take you to your car.’ If everyone behaves with that much kindness, we’ll be a spectacular institution of caring. That’s the essence of what I’m talking about.”

Just as the people of SIU make it a great institution, SIU has greatly influenced the direction Dr. Dorsey’s life has taken.

After earning his bachelor’s degree in chemistry from Fairfield University in Connecticut (1964), Dr. Dorsey earned a Ph.D. in physiological chemistry from the University of Wisconsin (1968). Medical school was the furthest thing from his mind. “My goal was to understand the basic mechanisms of disease and make a greater contribution.” As a postdoctoral fellow in biology at The Johns Hopkins University, he flew to Springfield to be interviewed by a handful of people for a research position at the new SIU School of Medicine. It was 1972, and Dr. Dorsey’s life was about to change.

It was the innovative teaching philosophy that drew Dr. Dorsey to the infant medical school at SIU. “The whole idea of change in education was woven into the fabric of the medical school,” he says, excitement glimmering in his eyes as he speaks at times in an intense whisper. “There was an excitement about SIU. We were focused on building something together that was new and doing it really well. We were changing the rules and mechanics almost weekly when the medical school started. I learned a lot about education.”

While achieving success as an assistant professor of chemistry and biochemistry at SIU Carbondale, Dr. Dorsey grew frustrated with the “agonizingly slow pace” of research. “I loved working with the medical students, and medicine started to fascinate me.”

So, at 32 years old, the Ph.D. began earning his M.D. “SIU was the only medical school I applied to. I loved being in school. I couldn’t believe that my job was to learn things. It was great.” He graduated with the class of 1978. “We were a very close class; we worked together, played together; we are friends for life.” Eighteen years later, the School named him the inaugural recipient of its Outstanding Alumnus Award.

The move from bench to bedside was a better fit for Dr. Dorsey’s affable personality. “Everything is all about people,” he says, speaking of love for treating patients. Upon completing his fellowship in rheumatology at the University of Iowa, Iowa City, (1981, 1983), the call of southern Illinois was too great to resist, and he returned to the medical school in 1983 as a clinical assistant professor at the Carbondale campus. “There’s something about being in front of the class, drawing them into your story, when you know that a student just ‘got it,’ that’s an incredibly powerful feeling.”

He also continued his eclectic research interests, projects that have covered everything from domestic violence and spirituality to cancer cell surfaces and cholesterol biosynthesis.

In addition, he was a rheumatologist with The Carbondale

nk of myself as faculty ... I like being part of eam.”

Clinic for 15 years and served as chief of staff for Memorial Hospital of Carbondale for three years. As a clinician, he discovered a joy of caring for the dying, powered largely by his wife's terminal illness. "That taught me a lot about being a physician," he says. "It changed my whole life. You appreciate in ways you can't imagine the kindness of people. I realized that if I could see or feel the kindness of people, then I could do a lot of good for patients and their families by being kind and supportive and caring. I tell students that as physicians. We are part of the cure, part of the treatment. Who we are as people matters; it's not just the medicine."

On the SIU campus, he immersed himself in the students' needs, heading clinical teaching activities for first-year medical students and spearheading the creation of "Empathy 101," a lunchtime discussion series that emphasizes the need for compassion in medicine, and he co-hosted dozens of live medical educational television shows. In 1998, he was named associate provost for the southern region in Carbondale.

And then, in 2001, SIU changed Dr. Dorsey's life again, when Dean Carl Getto called Dr. Dorsey into his office. "Dr. Getto said he was leaving, and that he thought I'd make a great dean. I was stunned. I wasn't sure I had what it took."

It seems hard to imagine that someone with as much care for the medical school as Dr. Dorsey should have doubts, but he explains.

"I like being a supporting player," he says, peppering his

speech with sports metaphors. "I like making the pass to the open guy who sinks the basket. I like being part of the team."

But as coach, Dr. Dorsey is aware that life is changing. "As dean, I know people will treat me a little differently, even deferentially. It's a little lonelier." But he's ready for the challenge and will use his past roles at SIU to help him be an effective dean. "As a medical student, I learned that the mantle of responsibility makes us work better and work harder."

The teacher in him will continue to shine as dean. "As a teacher, I was able to positively influence medical students — one class at a time. As dean, the idea of being a positive influence on an entire medical school — employees, residents, physicians and students, and their tens of thousands of patient encounters — is exciting."

SIU has been the heart of much change in Dr. Dorsey's life, but one thing that won't change is his commitment to medicine, to patients and the medical school.

The theme of change has applied in his personal life, too. Not only does he have a new title and a new home in Springfield, but he also is newly married to Linda Kruge, a computer programmer who works in Information Technology at SIU. Dr. Dorsey and his sons, Patrick, 22, and Ryan, 18, both SIU students, welcomed to their family Lydia, 21, a student at Northwestern, and Nick, 18, a Cornell undergraduate.

"Having four kids in college is quite a handful," says a smil-

PROFILE



Top: Dr. Dorsey laughs with fourth-year medical students Amanda Wood and Mary Baker, following the announcement of his appointment as dean and provost. Left: Dr. Dorsey and David Steward, M.D., share a pat on the back. Right, Linda Distlehorst, Ph.D., hugs Dr. Dorsey.

ing Dr. Dorsey.

His SIU family is important to the new dean as well. “This school is in my marrow,” he said at a news conference. “It is a rare privilege to be selected to lead an institution that I not only care so much about, but also one that cares so much for the people of Illinois whom we serve. Our challenge will lie in expanding the services we provide, such as cancer care and women’s and children’s programs, outreach efforts in rural Illinois and our young medical research enterprise during the current difficult economic time.”

A modest leader, Dean Dorsey exemplifies the values he holds dear for SIU School of Medicine: “Knowledge, compassion, kindness — “we can have it all.” ■

Dr. Dorsey

ASPECTS: Given the current economic situation, what is the state of the school right now?

DR. DORSEY: *In general, the state of the school is good. We have good people, good infrastructure and good programs. The trick is, how do we expand these and improve them with a shrinking budget? What everyone has to understand is we’re not alone; 46 states have shrinking budgets. As an institution, we need to decide what our absolute core issues are, the very essence of our being. Learning, teaching and healing are vital to our institution.*

What are SIU’s strengths?

It’s the people. I’ve been going department to department, attending regular meetings to meet with people, going on rounds, walking through the clinics. I want to know what people do, what matters to them.

I’ve been so impressed with the caliber of people at the school — we’ve got the people, the programs, the philosophy that say we care for people by the way we teach, the way we work, practice clinical medicine, research... the whole institution is a culture of caring.

y's Vision: A Culture of Caring



What current issues in health care concern you?

Access is number one; too many people have inadequate access to health care

Distribution and the number of physicians is another issue. It feels like we're heading into a physician shortage, but we can't be burning doctors out by working them 12 hours a day, seven days a week—they won't do their jobs very well.

Small rural towns are struggling with a large patient census and less than 10 doctors in their hospitals. How likely are doctors to come to that community? Rural areas have a population of people who are older, sicker and poorer. We have to work to attract health care resources to rural areas.

SIU's programs address a lot of those issues you mentioned

already, but how can SIU help?

The easy part is just by being here, graduating native sons and daughters and populating these rural areas with them in residencies. Residents tend to settle in the area they did their residency. So the longer we're here, it's like throwing a rock into the pond and seeing the ripples throughout central and southern Illinois.

Our outreach programs like telemedicine, the rural health initiative, sending specialists to communities, providing financial support for programs in rural communities — all these things are making a difference. We can be the catalyst for change.

How can you balance the needs of the different needs of the medical school: physicians, researchers, faculty, students and staff?

Caring is the tie that binds everyone in this institution. It's something that each and every one of us can do.

I keep reminding people this is a medical school; we care for people. There are people here who are suffering not just physically, but are dealing with social, emotional and spiritual pain. We do what we can — and we can care — that is vital to our core mission, not just caring for the patient, but caring for each other.

What is your vision for the medical school?

SIU School of Medicine is 30 years old. Like a graduate going out for his or her first job, we're at a decision point in our institutional life and we need to ask ourselves what we want to be.

This much is clear: our future is shared with the communities of central and southern Illinois.

If SIU School of Medicine does well, the community will do well and vice versa. What will drive us for the next five to 10 to 20 years is bringing increasingly comprehensive health-care services to the region. We want to take cancer care to the next level, for example, but we can't do it by ourselves. We can provide research expertise, and we should. But we need community resources to be the best teaching and best health care facility in the region. This requires the integral support and cooperation of community physicians and hospitals, and they have been great. They will help us develop into a mature, robust, training institution that serves the community of central and southern Illinois. ■