

Dr. Woodson holds some of the tiny instruments used in otolaryngology surgeries.



Dr. Gayle Woodson sustains a strong voice



CORDS

Chords

If you are flying on a plane and you sit next to Gayle Woodson, M.D., she won't talk to you. She's not being rude; she's protecting her voice — and yours. “Trying to talk over the engines in the dry air of the plane — you're probably not drinking enough water,” says the otolaryngologist surgeon.

“It's a terrible condition for your voice. If a person keeps trying to talk to me, sometimes I'll pretend I'm asleep.”

Such an act contradicts Dr. Woodson's warm, engaging and affable personality. Sipping a Diet Coke in her office at the St. John's Pavilion just steps away from her Voice Clinic, she's full of anecdotes about her past experiences, passionate about her current work treating voice disorders, and devoted to her husband, three children and stepson. How does she manage such a busy schedule? “Sometimes you put things on the back burner, and if they fall off, they weren't that important,” she says. “I focus on what's the most important thing today.”

Each day brings something new for Dr. Woodson, professor and chair of the Division of Otolaryngology, who performs surgery four or five days a week, leads a voice clinic on Fridays, and is an active researcher of diseases of the larynx.

Along with a career spent studying the voice, Dr. Woodson enjoys using her voice to sing, either with her husband and children singing all different kinds of music including classic pop songs, folk songs from her husband's native Newfoundland, or Broadway musicals (“Memory” from *Cats* is among her fa-

avorites). Though she has had no professional voice training, she sings in her choir at Laurel United Methodist Church. She also fills the church with her voice through the flute a few times a year. “When you sing, you sing with your whole body,” she explains. As a soprano, she sits on the far left of choir director Doug Hahn. Her husband, SimmonsCooper Cancer Institute Director Thomas Robbins, M.D., a head and neck cancer specialist, sits a few feet away with fellow bass vocalists.

It was the voice that first brought the couple together when they were both in fellowship training at the Institute of Laryngology & Otolaryngology in London, England. Dr. Woodson had difficulty understanding the mumbling locals with their thick British accents. Then she met Tom. “He was the only person I could understand!” she laughs. In the glow of a blazing bonfire, they sang together, and they've been inseparable ever since.

Internationally renowned for her work, Dr. Woodson has treated thousands of voices and has received dozens of awards. She has even treated a few famous people, but as a physician she can't reveal the names. “Sometimes, I don't know their music,” she admits, adding that she doesn't hesitate (much to her children's dismay) to suggest performers cancel their shows to rest their voices.

“If you're better trained as a singer, you'll have fewer problems,” she says. Likewise, the better you care for your voice, the lower the likelihood that you'll visit Dr. Woodson's Voice Clinic. “The voice is the way we communicate with people. If you have

Written by Karen Carlson • Photography by James Hawker



Dr. Woodson listens carefully to a patient while resident Kevin Gilbert, M.D., observes.

a nice voice, people want to listen to you.” Dr. Woodson has a nice voice: clear, bright, slightly soft and articulate, with no hint of a southern accent you might expect from her Texas upbringing.

Dr. Woodson has never been afraid to use her voice, despite the societal obstacles that were in her way to achieving her dream of becoming a physician. Growing up in small-town Wharton, Texas, 60 miles southwest of Houston, Gayle faced some small minds when, as a five year old, she told people she wanted to be a physician like her dad, a family practice doctor. “Everyone said, ‘Oh, you mean you want to be a nurse?’ I got the message that women weren’t supposed to be doctors.” She buried the dream and went to college “thinking I’d get married and maybe be a writer;”

she recalls. “But I realized I had a boring life and wouldn’t have much to write about!” Years of flute lessons had her considering becoming a professional flautist.

But a sociology assignment led her back to her ambition for a career in medicine. She interviewed a pediatrician who happened to be a woman. “Seeing that she was a doctor, had a practice and had children made me realize I could do it.”

She still encountered a few stumbling blocks because of her gender. A medical school interviewer rudely asked her, “What are you going to do if you have kids?” On the first day of class at Baylor College of Medicine, a fellow medical student mistook her for a secretary. “He never said another word to me all through medical school,” she recalls. Dr. Woodson took these bumps in stride, and her intelligence and drive easily swept her through studies.

Soon, the worlds of otolaryngology and surgery became her passions. As a resident at Johns Hopkins Hospital, Dr. Woodson recalls assisting in surgery of the vocal cords, when, in the middle of the procedure, the patient started to wake up and began soft moaning — and Dr. Woodson was staring right at his vocal cords. “The vocal cords made a sound like ‘vrrrrmm.’ From then on, I was fascinated.”

Back at Baylor for otolaryngology training, she assisted in a lot of heart surgeries. She observed that often, chest operations led to paralysis of one of the two nerves going to the vocal cords. “Dogma didn’t always fix them,” she says. “Things didn’t always go like clockwork, and I got really interested in that challenge.” She became further interested in how chest and thyroid surgeries impact the nerves going to the larynx. “This is the worse thing that could happen in the surgery. If you knock out one nerve, you are hoarse. But if you knock out both of the nerves, you can’t breathe. You have to have a tracheotomy.”

From vocal cord surgeries, to tracheal resections, to inserting tubes and taking out tonsils, Dr. Woodson enjoys the variations that her surgical specialty provides. “When I was deciding what specialty to do, surgery felt more like a team than other specialties that seemed preoccupied with mind games, competition, and one-upmanship.” As the leader of her surgery team, operating four or five days a week, Dr. Woodson encourages a tone unlike the tense experiences in surgery she had as a resident. “I want to create an atmosphere where everybody feels what their doing is valued, and that anyone can speak up when they have a concern.”

Equipment to Tanzania

In addition to her surgeries and clinics, Dr. Woodson engages in several outreach efforts. She works with a group at the Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Center in Northern Tanzania, Africa, going about twice a year. "The country has a great need for ENT physicians," she says. "There are only seven otolaryngologists in a country of 40 million people." Those ENT doctors, untrained in the complexities of laryngectomies and other head and neck surgeries, could only treat basic ENT and ear surgeries. "We saw five people dying from advanced larynx cancer. That just shouldn't happen."

Her latest passion is working with the Hospital Sisters Mission to collect medical equipment for the medical center. Every year, millions of dollars of equipment gets discarded, from anesthesia machines to operating tables and hospital beds, as hospitals replace them with newer equipment. Hospitals have donated equipment to the Sisters Mission. Before the equipment is shipped, the donations are inspected and repaired. Adding to the Chinese proverb about teaching a man to fish, Dr. Woodson says, "It doesn't matter how much you know about fishing if you don't have a fishing pole."

OUTREACH



While she says it's a lot more accepted now to be a woman and a surgeon, she points out that there are fewer women than men in the higher echelons of academic leadership. After rewarding experiences in academic medicine at Baylor, University of California—San Diego, the University of Tennessee and the University of Florida, Dr. Woodson came to SIU School of Medicine in 2003. As professor and chair of the Division of Otolaryngology and director of the otolaryngology residency program, Dr. Woodson has reached those higher echelons and is a good role model for her students and residents of either gender. A thoughtful speaker, she's also a careful listener, which makes for an effective teacher.

"Dr. Woodson is an internationally-known laryngologist but just as effective at home as division chair," says Gary Dunnington, M.D., chairman of the SIU Department of Surgery. "She is approachable, humble and fun-loving. She is clearly one of the most respected surgeons in the U.S. today. She brings great prestige to SIU."

A world-renowned surgeon, otolaryngologist and researcher, Dr. Woodson has overcome the doubters in her early days in medicine. "There's more of a general acceptance that it's not odd to be a woman and be a doctor — there's less polarization of men do this and women do that — but there still is some." She still gets asked what it's like to be a female surgeon. Her response? "I say, 'I don't know what it's like to be male surgeon, so I can't compare.'" ●●●

At an evening lecture for the community on voice care, Dr. Woodson explains to her audience of mostly singers, actors and lawyers the biology of the vocal cords.