

Rob Winn, MD

Getting his shot

A family's work ethic beats the odds

By Jim Spencer

After his parents worked themselves to exhaustion to move their family from the slums of Buffalo, N.Y., to the suburb of Kenmore, Rob Winn went from academic wunderkind to wondering what kind of student he really was.

"I had to drop out of all of my honors classes," Winn recalls of his transfer to Kenmore West High School. "I had to take remedial reading."

Winn also had to make a decision. Did he want to dig in and try to prove a working-class black kid from the inner city could compete academically with upper-middle class white suburban children?

He looked only as far as his home training to find the answer.

His father, Harrison, started out as a Georgia sharecropper. Raised by relatives after his mother died, Harrison Winn dropped out of school to help his adoptive family earn a living. He picked cotton and chopped tobacco. Fleeing the poverty of the South, Harrison Winn moved to Buffalo, hoping to get a union job with General Motors. The closest he got was washing and waxing cars for a local auto dealer. So he learned to run a crane at R&R Salvage, a local junkyard. Then, Harrison Winn went to night school to learn how to read and started reading *The New York Times* every day. Life, as he showed by example, is usually Plan B.

Harrison's wife, Vertia, grew up in Buffalo, steeped in a work ethic that taught her to do whatever it took to pull her own weight. So after giving birth to two boys, whom she called Bobby and Don, she labored her way to the top of the clerk-typist pool at a local government



agency.

In turn, her first born—named Robert Andrew after Robert Kennedy and Andrew Jackson—chose to work his way to the upper percentile of his high school class. Then, he chose to go to Notre Dame. Then, he chose to go to medical school at the University of Michigan, marry his "study buddy" and accept a residency at Rush Presbyterian Hospital in Chicago. There, he was intern of the year, twice selected resident of the year and rose to be chief resident.

Finally, in 1997, Bobby Winn, by then known as Rob, took a fellowship in pulmonary medicine and critical care at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. What was supposed to be a three-year stint in the Rocky Mountain West turned into a commitment to fighting lung cancer and attracting more diverse medical school classes as assistant dean of admissions.

Now 44, Rob Winn, MD, doesn't brag about how far he has come, but his journey says plenty.

The Winn's battled their way out of a Buffalo neighborhood that had turned ugly. The family worked almost nonstop to raise the money to move, but saving enough to get to the suburbs took time. Meanwhile, drug dealers and prostitutes took up residence next door. The neighbors fired shots near the Winn home. The final stroke, the one that convinced Winn's father that he must leave immediately or turn vigilante, came when his youngest son Don, then 12, yelled at neighbors for letting their dog wander onto the Winn's property.

"A grown man sitting on the porch took a beer can, threw it at Don and hit him in the forehead," Rob Winn recalls.

Winn's father came dangerously close to violent retaliation, the doctor remembers. Instead of risking his life attacking the thugs next

Harrison Winn, far left, got his picture taken in a New York City bus station as he headed from Georgia to Buffalo to find a better life. His son, Rob, near left in tie, was among the top students in Buffalo's PS 62. Now a successful physician, Rob Winn, next page, helps recruit potential medical students from minority groups.



door, his father scraped together every penny he could find and moved his family to safety in Kenmore.

It still took something besides a change of ZIP codes to produce a happy ending, though.

“Bobby had trouble,” Harrison Winn says of his son’s transition from stardom in the Buffalo schools to his initial academic smackdown at Kenmore West. “But he was a hard fighter. We’d be in bed at midnight or 1 a.m., and he’d still be fighting those books.”

Raised in a family that proved effort can overcome almost anything, the boy was

above their parents’ circumstances. “I wanted them to do better with their lives,” Vertia Winn says.

Winn says his father set few limits except “he didn’t want me to get my feet dirty or my hands burned.”

Winn’s brother Don now works as a New York state trooper.

Meanwhile, Rob Winn—a self-described “proud graduate of Head Start,” the early education program for poverty-stricken children—runs a lung cancer research lab at a major medical school. He includes minority student interns among the staff. As a researcher, Winn looks at the role of genes in tumor development. As a clinician, he recently helped start a multidisciplinary lung clinic at the University of Colorado Cancer Center. There, pulmonologists, surgeons, radiologists and oncologists team with one another in hopes of diagnosing and treating lung cancer more efficiently and effectively. He calls the integrated approach

“awesome.” What would give Winn an equal rush would

be to train thousands of African-American, Latino, Asian and rural physicians. One of Winn’s goals as an admissions dean is to establish better ties

actually angry at the academic double standard between poor and rich schools.

“I wondered, ‘Why isn’t this education being offered to everybody?’” Winn says. “That ticked me off. That’s one reason I’m motivated to help people in every kind of community.”

A Notre Dame alumnus in Buffalo and, later, a couple of priests in South Bend saw this flame and fanned it. First, the alumnus helped Winn get into college, then, the priests directed him to medical school.

“I found him to be a most sincere young man who had a genuine care for others,” says Rev. Joseph Walter, who advised Winn. “He always had a smile and a calm disposition. He took his studies seriously, but without the so-called ‘premed syndrome.’”

Winn’s first reaction to the suggestion that he become a physician was: “I don’t know any black doctors.” Typically, his family rallied around him. “Junking” paid for his textbooks in undergraduate and medical school. On evenings when people put out discarded items for the city to collect, Winn’s maternal grandfather and his father would work full day shifts, gobble dinner, hop in a truck and go “junking” until 11 p.m. or midnight. “We’d go up and down the streets,” Harrison Winn explains, “take what you could salvage and sell it.”

Harrison and Vertia Winn worked hard so their boys could rise

with Colorado’s communities of color, as well as its underserved rural and urban areas.

“I just didn’t know what was out there,”

Winn says of his own life. “You need people to expose you.”

People also need role models. On that count Winn had two of the best.

Vertia Winn promised her kids: “You can do anything if you work hard.” But even she admits that she sometimes wonders how the dream came true. “I have to pinch myself when I think that the boy from Sycamore Street grew up to be a doctor,” she says.

Sometimes, the man that boy grew into has to pinch himself, too.

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