

Integrity with a capital I

At the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration, Dr. Deborah Parham Hopson, associate administrator for the HIV/AIDS Bureau, is responsible for a \$2 billion program with more than 100 employees that is very much in the public eye. But every month, she sits

down for a lunchtime “Chat and Chew,” where employees of the HIV/AIDS bureau—from secretaries to program officers to branch directors—can join her and share their concerns.

“It’s just an opportunity for my staff to get unfiltered information from the horse’s mouth. This is a structured way to keep a direct line of communication open,” says Parham Hopson, who earned her master’s and doctoral degrees in health policy and administration from the UNC School of Public Health.

The practice is characteristic of Parham Hopson’s concern for her staff, says Idalia Sanchez, who once reported indirectly to Parham Hopson and is now senior policy advisor for the National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities. “You may not have all the things you need in terms of resources, but if you know that you have Dr. Parham Hopson’s ear and her support, it makes a big difference,” Sanchez says.

Providing that support is part of Parham Hopson’s definition of leadership. “If you’re a leader, you listen to employees and try to

treat them like they want to be treated. You have to listen to them to find out what makes them tick and what makes them want to produce and to work for you,” she says.

The approach has worked for Parham Hopson who rose to the rank of assistant surgeon general and rear admiral in the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service, making her the highest rank-

ing African-American woman in the Corps. She’s also the first African-American nurse to rise to that rank. Those are no small feats in an organization in which promotions are based on a yearly review of accomplishments, and physicians often retire as captains.

Parham Hopson is a registered nurse whose clinical experience is in neonatal intensive care nursing. It was during a rotation in nursing school that she discovered her excitement for public health. In those days,



Dr. Deborah Parham Hopson

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nurses were expected to work for at least a year in a hospital before going into public health. At age 21, a year seemed like a long time to her, so she decided to get into the field through a master’s degree. Accepted at two schools, she almost went to the one closer to her Ohio home until she visited Carolina and decided it was for her. “It was one of the best decisions I ever made,” she says.

Even at that point in her career, Parham Hopson knew she was good at leading people and programs. “When I was first working on my master’s in public health, I thought I wanted to run a health center,

You have to pick your route. When you don’t know which way to step, just do what’s right.

a little community clinic somewhere,” she says. Then, for her required field training for her master’s degree, she spent a summer in Washington as a White House intern. “I was there working in the White House in the Office of the Special Assistant to the President on Health Affairs. That gave me an inkling of health policy at a very high level. I realized I could help make the policies for all the clinics and have a bigger impact, and I liked that,” she says.

Dr. Deborah Parham Hopson (far right) pauses for a photo with her Tanzanian counterparts during an April 2007 trip to Tanzania as part of the Council of Women World Leaders Ministerial Fellows Program. Left to right: HRSA Administrator Dr. Betty Duke; Sarah Parker of the Council of Women World Leaders; Mwantumu Mahiza; Joyce Mapunjo; and Parham Hopson. Parham Hopson earned her master's and doctoral degrees from Carolina. She is assistant surgeon general and rear admiral in the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service, making her the highest ranking African-American in the Corps.

After earning her master's, Parham Hopson served as a presidential management intern, during which she got her first experience with the U.S. Public Health Service, working in the Bureau of Community Health Services, placing nurses in underserved areas. A few years later, she worked her way back to the Commissioned Corps of the Public Health Service, serving in several positions, including chief nurse. "I was responsible for nurses and nurse practitioners. When they ran into clinical issues out in the field, I would work with them to help them resolve those issues," she says.

In her current position, she's responsible for managing the Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program, which funds medical care, treatment, referrals and support services for uninsured and underserved people living with HIV as well as training for health care professionals. And, as part of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, she directs a multi-million dollar global HIV/AIDS program with training, care and treatment activities in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean.

Parham Hopson has worked on the policy side of the HIV and AIDs epidemic since 1994. Her introduction to the disease came in the early 1990s, when she worked on a project of the Coalition of 100 Black Women, a volunteer service organization. The organization raised money for Grandma's House, a home for babies that had been born to mothers living with AIDS. "That was in the early 90s, when people didn't quite know how HIV was transmitted, and didn't know whether you might catch AIDS by holding and loving these children," Parham Hopson says. Just before that experience, she had worked on her PhD at Carolina, where



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discussions centered around HIV/AIDS as a major epidemic. "But when I started working with babies, it became more than an intellectual discussion. These were real people living and dying with AIDS," she says.

Because the Ryan White program was written into law by Congress, Parham Hopson's job involves managing not only money and people, but also expectations. "Explaining to people why we're managing the program the way we're managing it is as critical a part of the job as handing out medications to people with HIV, because without the congressional support there would be no money for those programs," she says. But Parham Hopson loves this tough job that at times can be a political minefield. "You have to pick your route," she says. "When you don't know

which way to step, just do what's right."

Parham Hopson's genuine sense of caring can be a rarity in Washington, says Dr. Joseph O'Neill, who supervised Parham Hopson when he was director of the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration's HIV/AIDS Bureau and she was his deputy. "The word that comes to mind is *integrity* with a capital *I*," O'Neill says. "That is not something you find every day in Washington, particularly at the high policy level at which she lives. She's got a very high level of personal ethics. You don't get anywhere in the political life without having people disagree with you. But I dare say even people who disagree with her on substantive policy issues would never question her integrity or motivation." ■

— BY ANGELA SPIVEY