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Illinois’ top doc adopts mother’s dream To Make a Difference

Story by Frank Stephenson
Photography by Robert Knapp

Eric Whitaker remembers the neighborhood of his childhood as a community held together by a collective reverence for ritual and respect, a place where working class families forged an air of accomplishment and hope.

These were days before economic and social upheaval gripped Chicago’s South Side, a time, Eric recalls, when the eyes of young black men in the Woodlawn community sparkled with the glint of self-reliance and the promise of a future filled with possibility.

But even before he reached his teens, Eric began to see this world decay. South Side families who had depended on local steel mills and other factory jobs for their livelihoods for more than 60 years were devastated when those jobs began vanishing in the early ’70s.

Like the victims of some insidious plague, communities like Woodlawn began to convulse, shrivel and die. Gradually, many who could afford to move out did so, leaving behind blighted streets easily infected by a social pox.

Eric’s family, led by an iron-willed mother, moved as well, but never out of the South Side. (His dad, a part-time bread truck driver and handyman, left when Eric was in fifth grade.) His mom was a nurse — a nurse with a plan.

Early on, she recognized the telltale signs of her community’s social and economic disintegration. She set out to defy the odds that her three children — all boys — would succumb to the same diseases that were relentlessly destroying the lives of countless young black men around them. Long before he realized it, Eric — the middle son — was living a dream his mother had from the day she bore him.

“She always had a vision that I would become a doctor,” Whitaker said. “She simply had that dream, long before I had any of my own. And over time, I ended up taking her dream as my own.”

In almost fairy-tale fashion, Whitaker made the dream he adopted from his mother come true, graduating from the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine in 1993. Then, in a move that surprised only those who didn’t know him well, Whitaker suddenly turned his back on a lucrative career path rarely accessible to African Americans and returned instead to his old neighborhood to become what he cheerfully calls a “country doc” for the South Side’s poorest communities.

Early this year, Whitaker’s remarkable story, punctuated by his groundbreaking work in black men’s health, caught the attention of Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich. In March, the governor appointed Whitaker the state’s top health officer, naming him director of the Illinois Department of Public Health. Even Whitaker’s dream-weaver mom never imagined the true depth of her vision.



Eric Whitaker was recently appointed Illinois’ top health official: director of public health.

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On the eve of taking office this past March, Whitaker reflected on his career, his upbringing and living under the roof of a mom on a mission.

“By the time I was in fifth grade, my mom became the most important person in my life,” he recalled. “For me and my two brothers, my mom’s No. 1 priority was to raise fine models of black men who could get educated and take care of their families. That’s all she thought about.”

But no matter her determination, Whitaker’s mom instinctively knew that her boys craved a solid male authority figure in their lives. Eric got one in grade school — his basketball coach, John Kerr.

“Coach Kerr became like a father figure to me, and he became a major influence on my life,” Whitaker said. When he got the call from the governor’s office confirming his appointment to the state post, his former basketball coach was one of the first people Whitaker phoned with the news.

“He was thrilled. Coach Kerr taught me that basketball was a passport to an education — nothing more — and that any ideas of becoming a star in the NBA just weren’t realistic,” he said. “This is the kind of great advice I was lucky to have as a kid. When I speak to high school students today, I try to pass that on.”

Whitaker's grade school prepared him scholastically, but his education in the fundamentals of racism awaited him in his predominantly white Catholic high school. Amid a political background that saw Harold Washington become Chicago's first black mayor, as a teen Whitaker watched gangs of neo-Nazis spew their hatred of minorities into his and other black faces outside his high school.

Today, Whitaker sees value in that experience. "This was a good thing for me," he said, "because it prepared me for excelling in the face of racism."

Outside gym and his classrooms, Whitaker's most memorable experience in high school came in his junior year: He volunteered for a program aimed at encouraging black students to pursue careers in science and health professions. This program enabled him to visit a pre-natal clinic that served what was at the time the largest housing project in the world, the South Side's Robert Taylor Project. Whitaker was stunned to see dozens of young women lined up in rows along the sidewalk, patiently waiting their turns to see a doctor in a tiny clinic. The scene etched an indelible impression on him.

"At that moment I realized the need out there, and I thought about my potential ability for ameliorating some of that need," he said.

After his third year of medical school, Whitaker's professional passion began to coalesce around the issue of black men's health. While working on a master's degree in public health at Harvard (which he pursued halfway through medical school), he was part of a project in Boston's Roxbury community aimed at getting a handle on the prevalence of prostate cancer. To his surprise, Whitaker learned that comparatively little was known about black men's health in general. Suddenly, he knew what he wanted to do when he finished medical school.

Less than two years after joining the staff of Cook County Hospital in 1996 as a primary care physician, Whitaker created "Project Brotherhood: A Black Men's Clinic" in the heart of his childhood neighborhood in Woodlawn. The community that once stood as a rock-solid anchor for generations of blacks in

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Whitaker surrounded by men from Project Brotherhood.

the South Side had become a shell of itself, a breeding ground for crime, social disease and despair. Whitaker saw this as an opportunity to make a difference. By all accounts, he has

Launched with all-volunteer help in November 1998, Project Brotherhood now is being hailed as a model for attacking what some health professionals believe may be the toughest problem facing inner-city health care in America. Whitaker's approach tackles the core of the problem: the dogged reluctance of poor black men to seek any kind of medical treatment for fear of being viewed as weak or vulnerable by their peers.

"Before you can treat anybody, you've got to get them into the door," Whitaker said. "And you're not going to do that if you build a clinic where the doctors don't look and talk like the patients."

In the inner city, black men often avoid health clinics, Whitaker found, regarding them largely as refuges for women and children. A visit to such a place for even a routine blood test can be seen as a blow to black virility.

Whitaker's solution was to create an environment where black men didn't feel threatened, where they could feel comfortable talking about most anything — including their health. As a kid he knew such a place: the neighborhood barbershop. In such a setting, the snicker-snack and buzz of barber tools made an inviting backdrop for gossip, chitchat and tall tales by the all-

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Open only one night a week — Thursdays — at the Woodlawn Health Center, the black men's clinic is almost always packed, no appointment (or insurance) necessary. An all-black staff — including three male physicians and one female — serve the barbershop crowd a spate of free treatment ranging from prostate exams to HIV screenings. In the mix, there's a variety of other help available. Patients can learn job-seeking skills, such as writing a resume, and work on personal problems in seminars on anger management or parenting.

Testimonials from young "graduates" of the program — a dozen or more who have kicked their drug habits and found good jobs — are making other cities take notice. Whitaker said he has fielded numerous calls from curious health officials in other cities anxious to quell similar problems.

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Whitaker's professional transition from "country doctor" to state health chief may pose a marital dilemma. His wife, Cheryl Rucker, also a physician, is a transplanted Georgian who has yet to fall in love with Chicago's winters. "She would like to move back there," Whitaker said, "and I would like to give her that gift someday."

For the moment, Cheryl — the only member of her family ever to go to college, much less medical school — is obliged to hunker down and weave her own dreams for Caleb, the couple's 3-year-old son, and perhaps in time catch that sparkle in her little man's eyes.

Outside the Woodlawn Health Center on Chicago's South Side.

