

# From ridicule to recognition: A doctor's story

By D. J. Wilson

Special to Sentinel-Voice

ST. LOUIS (NNPA) - Michael R. DeBaun's trouble with school didn't fit the stereotype of a young Black male failing his courses and scoring low on tests. DeBaun's difficulty in 7th grade was that he was good at schoolwork and he liked it, but that didn't play well with his friends.

"I was embarrassed by my proclivity to study," DeBaun recalls. "It wasn't cool to be smart. You weren't supposed to be smart in my neighborhood. If you're sitting in honors class, you're smart. If you carry your books home, you're smart. If you have certain privileges, you're smart. It's just not cool."

DeBaun went so far as to keep one set of books at home and one at school to hide the fact that he studied every night. He'd get an extra copy of a book by telling his teacher he had lost his, or he'd lift a book when it was left unattended.

"That way I could walk home with my buddies," says DeBaun, referring to friends who had no interest in studying. "We were doing things that were considered delinquent at the time — and still are. Studying is not part of that culture."

A few years later DeBaun had to make a choice between being accepted by his peers and living outside their boundaries. DeBaun chose to excel at school, and it paid off.

After graduating from St. Louis University High School and Howard University, he earned his Ph.D. at Stanford University in 1987 and M.P.H. at the Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene

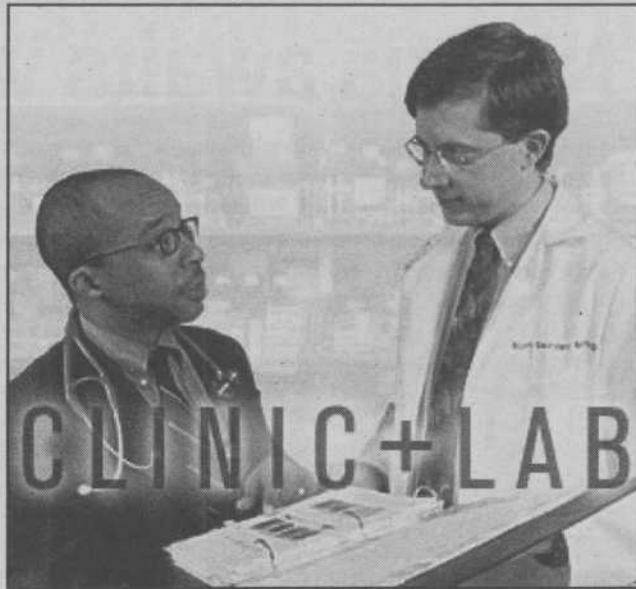
## Campaign

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hood development centers and we have other projects on the books."

Plans are in the works to build a 42,000-square-foot community center on Martin Luther King Blvd. at Carey Avenue, Gates said.

In a campaign finance report made public in January, Gates had \$196,000 in contributions. Commissioner Gates said she would need about \$600,000 to finance a re-election campaign. Gates said she is worthy of re-election. "My feeling is if its not broke, why try to fix something? I have been responsive to the needs of my constituents. We have been able to accomplish a lot together."



Michael R. DeBaun, MD, MPH, (left) talks with Scott Saunders, MD, PhD. DeBaun overcame an environment in which doing well in school was frowned upon to become a doctor.

and Public Health with an emphasis in Epidemiology in 1993.

DeBaun went on to become a pediatrician at St. Louis Children's Hospital, where he also completed a three-year fellowship in Pediatric Hematology-Oncology and an internationally known researcher into sickle cell disease and genetic cancer disposition.

He is an associate professor of pediatrics and biostatistics at Washington University School of Medicine and director of the Sickle Cell Medical Treatment and Education Center at St. Louis Children's Hospital, which treats about 350 children and their families.

DeBaun's sickle cell disease research last year led to a \$18.5 million grant from the National Institutes of Health, the largest grant ever awarded to a Washington University pediatrician. The grant will fund a six-year international study at 22 sites, including sites in France, England and Canada.



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she said.

Meanwhile, Howard has two named opponents for the senate seat. Democrat Theresa Malone, a member of the State Board of Education, is running. Cedric Crear, a former casino marketing manager, is talking up a campaign, too.

"People call me about

other things than just issues related to higher education," Howard said. "If I became a senator, I can address a wider range of issues. As a regent, I learned where a lot of the problems stem from. I have a long record of community service. I think I can do a better job than the other candidates can."

churches.

In 1998, the state of Missouri awarded DeBaun funds to expand the care for children with sickle cell disease, enabling the Department of Pediatrics at Children's Hospital to establish a "multidisciplinary" treatment program for sickle cell patients, from newborn screening to early childhood.

His desire to have a positive impact on the health of African-Americans spurred DeBaun, who is a member of the Sickle Cell Disease Association of America to focus on research when he went to medical school at Stanford and then in his residency at St. Louis Children's Hospital.

"At first, the concept of doing research was pretty foreign to me," says DeBaun.

"Medical research has such a negative connotation for Black people. There was the misuse of research subjects, but when you begin to understand the power of doing research, the applications of research and how it can change the quality of life, particularly for Black people, then you begin to understand you have no choice if you want to effect change."

For DeBaun, that community started on Margaretta Avenue in North St. Louis near Fairgrounds Park. Before starting school, his parents moved the family to Univer-

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sity City, where DeBaun started kindergarten.

"It was the beginning of the White flight movement," says DeBaun.

Although, in general his teachers were "nurturing," DeBaun says it was clear that Black students weren't expected to do as well as Whites.

Students were put in tracks based on their assessed academic ability. DeBaun was one of only two or three Blacks put in a higher track..

"I got into a tussle in the streets," DeBaun recalls.

"I realized for the group I was hanging around with, that this was not a trajectory that was going to have a good ending. There was an altercation between the people in my neighborhood and the people in another neighborhood. It was a wake up call. The police were not involved, but my mom knew about it. Clearly, a few more of these incidents would not end up in my friends' favor."

DeBaun thrived at SLUH, but he still had to deal with stereotypes. But that didn't

deter him.

"That was due to the environment I came up in. Those barriers were not a detriment to what I was going to do. That's not how we grew up in my family, in my culture. You just sort of buckled down."

His next few years, on scholarship at Howard University in Washington D.C. were an "absolute contrast" from SLUH, where he didn't participate in any of the school social events.

"I was mentored by several teachers, professors many of whom were first in their category - the first Black chemistry Ph.D. to graduate from Columbia University, the first Black physics Ph.D. to graduate from North Carolina," he said.

"They were very instructive on how to move within the system to get you what you wanted. They provided a resource on how to succeed for Black students."

He said his own pediatrician influenced his decision to become a physician.

D. J. Wilson writes for the St. Louis American.

## Castillo tabbed student of month

Angela Castillo was recently selected by her peers at The Expertise School of Beauty as April's student of the month. The 22-year-old wife and mother of three has excelled as a cosmetologist for the past year.

Castillo's interest in cosmetology grew out of styling hair for family members in her native Mexico. Her father encouraged her to pursue cosmetology as a career.

After graduating on April 30, the six-year Las Vegas resident plans to continue working and building her clientele, in hopes of eventually venturing into business ownership. Her goal is to run two salons.

Castillo expressed gratitude at being honored.



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