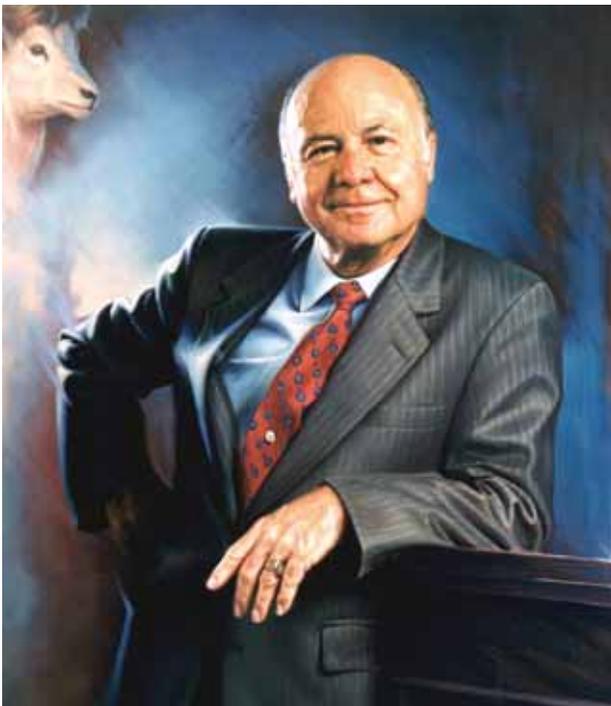


# ALABAMA LEGENDS

## *in Obstetrics and Gynecology*

### CHARLES E. FLOWERS JR., M.D.



**DR. CHARLES FLOWERS** was a champion of compassionate medicine and a transformative force for women's health care in Alabama. A renowned teacher and clinician, he trained a network of skilled obstetrician/gynecologists that now reaches across the entire state. As the first full-time chairman of the UAB Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, he also built one of the leading academic departments in the nation, elevating the standard of care for patients in Alabama and throughout the Southeast.

Dr. Flowers was born in Zebulon, North Carolina, in 1920. Raised on a farm, he later recalled that long hours spent plowing behind a mule convinced him to seek out a better way to make a living. He graduated from The Citadel with academic and military honors in 1941 and received his medical degree from Johns Hopkins University in 1944. Following his internship and residency at Hopkins, Dr. Flowers served as a captain in the

United States Army Medical Corps for two years before returning to the faculty at Hopkins in 1948. He went on to positions of increasing responsibility at the State University of New York and at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; then, in 1966, he was named chairman of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the Baylor College of Medicine.

Three years later, Dr. S. Richardson Hill, dean of the Medical College of Alabama (later the University of Alabama School of Medicine), invited Dr. Flowers to Birmingham as a consultant. Dr. Hill charged Dr. Flowers with formulating a plan to transform the school's ob/gyn department, which had only a part-time faculty, into an elite program. A few weeks after receiving his recommendations, Dr. Hill called to offer him the chairman's role—and the support to put his plan into action.

After he arrived on January 1, 1969, Dr. Flowers quickly began to recruit additional full-time faculty members, including Dr. J. Benjamin Younger in reproductive endocrinology, Dr. John Huddleston in maternal-fetal medicine, and Dr. Hugh Shingleton in gynecologic oncology. He also focused on reshaping the department's residency program. He tirelessly recruited top candidates and insisted that his faculty devote themselves to teaching as well as to patient care and research. After his residents finished their training, Dr. Flowers often helped guide them to underserved areas of the state.

"Dr. Flowers really believed that by training the right people, he could make a big difference in maternal mortality, infant mortality, and stillbirth rates throughout Alabama—and he did," says Dr. Robert L. Goldenberg, professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the Drexel University College of Medicine, who was a junior faculty member under Dr. Flowers and later became chairman of the UAB Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology.

In 1974, Dr. Flowers convinced his friend Dr. Bruce Harris to leave private practice in New York and join him in Birmingham. This led to the creation of an outreach liaison system through which the department provided professional development and consultation for colleagues throughout Alabama. Dr. Flowers also insisted that his faculty members make themselves available for consultations through UAB's innovative Medical

Information Service via Telephone (MIST) system, which gave rural practitioners direct access to the specialists in Birmingham.

Under Dr. Flowers's leadership, the department established the first coordinated gynecologic oncology program in the state, as well as a nurse practitioner program that provided gynecologic care for indigent women. Faculty in UAB's ob/gyn department were also instrumental in initiating an effective Division of Maternal and Child Health Care in the Alabama Department of Health.

"He recruited good people and then let them alone," says Dr. Richard Blackwell, professor of obstetrics and gynecology at UAB, who began his residency training under Dr. Flowers in 1979. "He let you formulate your own agenda and supported you. That's why so many people who worked with Dr. Flowers on the faculty or trained with him as residents have been able to succeed." That group includes most of the subsequent chairs of the UAB Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, including the current chairman, Dr. William W. Andrews.

As a teacher, Dr. Flowers communicated two ironclad principles: a commitment to evidence-based medicine and a concern for the welfare of all patients. "Dr. Flowers made us justify everything we did rather than just practice medicine the way we'd always been taught," says Dr. J. Maxwell Austin Jr., professor of obstetrics and gynecology at UAB, who joined Dr. Flowers in Birmingham as a third-year resident in 1969. "It really was the beginning of formal academic ob/gyn training in Alabama."

In an era when physicians often made decisions without their patients' input, Dr. Flowers taught his trainees to keep their ears open. "Charlie believed that if you listened to the patient, she would tell you what was wrong with her, and that's something he truly inculcated in his teaching," says his widow, Dr. Juanzetta Flowers. This plainspoken, commonsense approach was captured in his 1979 book, *A Woman Talks With Her Doctor*.

Dr. Flowers achieved nationwide respect as a teacher and clinician and was elected to leadership positions in both the American Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. He authored several books and more than a hundred scholarly articles and served as editor of five major journals of obstetrics and gynecology. After Dr. Flowers retired in 1985, the UAB Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology established the Charles E. Flowers, Jr., Endowed Professorship in his honor. Fittingly, his old friend Dr. Bruce Harris became its first recipient.

Eight years earlier, in 1977, Dr. Flowers's former residents had conferred on him their own honor, founding the Charles E. Flowers, Jr., Society. He relished the accolade—and the group's annual meetings, which he attended regularly until he passed away in April 1999. The meetings reflected his own character, combining serious scientific programs with warm fellowship and opportunities for outdoor adventures.

After work and his family, hunting was Dr. Flowers's great passion. He brought the same level of energy to tracking big game in Africa that he brought to diagnosing patients in Birmingham. "He was enthusiastic out in the field—the same way he

was enthusiastic in the hospital or seeing patients," says Dr. Ed Varner, professor of obstetrics and gynecology at UAB, who trained under Dr. Flowers in the early 1980s. "He'd get a twinkle in his eye. On days when I'm having a hard time, I step back and think about Dr. Flowers. Mentors like that are why you work hard and enjoy yourself doing it."

Looking back at the end of his career, Dr. Flowers evaluated his own abilities in this way: "After all these years, I think of myself as an excellent obstetrician and an adequate surgeon," he wrote. "But I really feel I was a good gynecologist because I was deeply interested in all aspects of women."

Dr. Flowers's "profound respect" for women was "an outstanding feature of his personality," says Dr. Harris. "Charlie was a humanist. He was also a very fearless person, a doer, and a leader. He graduated from The Citadel, the military college of South Carolina, and I could easily imagine him leading a charge. In fact, he did lead a few charges and stepped on some toes. But he got what he wanted, which was a really modern, first-class department. His residents are now dispersed around the country, and they're uniformly first-class people and leaders in their various communities."

"He had courage and the strength of character to do what he saw needed to be done," adds Dr. Juanzetta Flowers. "But the thing that endeared him to his residents and made them the people they are today is that they knew that deep down he loved them and wanted the best for them, and he wanted them to be their best. And they strove very hard to rise to that challenge."



Above: Dr. Flowers (at right) offers a tour of UAB Hospital's neonatal nursery, circa 1980



Left: Dr. Flowers in the 1960s

*Photos courtesy UAB Archives*