

ALABAMA LEGENDS

in Obstetrics and Gynecology

O.M. OTTS JR., M.D.



DR. O.M. OTTS JR. showed a commitment to obstetrics and gynecology education and care in Alabama that went far beyond the hospital doors. Dr. Otts was determined to share the benefits of his experience with the medical residents under his watch and to model for them his deep-seated respect for patients. But Dr. Otts also provided his students with a surrogate family, fishing lessons, and decades of friendship once they became colleagues.

Senior obstetrics and gynecology residents from the University of Alabama School of Medicine were sent to the residency training program at Mobile General Hospital for the excellent gynecologic surgical training provided there in the early 1960s. Dr. Otts volunteered his time to run that program in the 1960s and early 1970s until The University of South Alabama (USA) College of Medicine was formed.

Dr. Otts, who retired from active practice at age 75, recalls that as he became an experienced physician, he saw how important it was that residents got thorough and serious training in the hospital. “I felt I had a duty to train them,” he says.

Former resident and colleague Dr. Conrad Pierce says that the contribution that Dr. Otts made to the profession can’t be overstated: “He believed in medical education and he believed in training people in the right way to provide for future generations. He had remarkable vision and foresight to do that at that time.”

Dr. Richard Otts, son of Dr. O.M. Otts Jr., who is also an obstetrician/gynecologist in Mobile, notes that his father took on other duties as well. “He directed care of indigent patients in Mobile County for many years. He was a board-certified ob/gyn who did hands-on care for these patients for nothing ... and he enjoyed it.” Fay Otts Phillips, daughter of Dr. O.M. Otts Jr., recalls that her father managed to do all that while on call every other night and weekend to deliver his private-practice patients’ babies.

Dr. Otts was born in Mobile in 1921 in the same house in which he and his beloved wife, Fay, would later raise their three children—O.M. Otts III (who goes by Mac, like his father), Dr. Richard Otts, and Fay Otts

Phillips. One of his nine grandchildren is in medical school now. He also has 11 great-grandchildren. Fay passed away five years ago.

Dr. Otts received an undergraduate degree from Davidson College in North Carolina and graduated from Tulane Medical School in 1944. Not long after starting a practice, he was drafted during the Korean War to serve as an obstetrician at an Army base in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and moved his young family there for two years before returning to practice in Mobile.

When USA College of Medicine was formed in the early 1970s, Dr. Otts helped recruit a salaried director—he turned down the position himself because he was determined to stay in private practice. He would continue to practice until he was 75.

Dr. Otts also served on numerous boards around the medical and civic community in Mobile, including the position of chairman of the Board of Health in Mobile County before that was a full-time job. He was especially devoted to supporting what is now UMS-Wright Preparatory School.

Residents who trained with Dr. Otts recall the great amount of personal attention he gave them. Among other things, the residents held “journal club” meetings at the home of Dr. and Mrs. Otts, where they would discuss the latest published papers after Mrs. Otts had served them dinner. And Dr. Otts took residents along on fondly remembered Gulf fishing trips on his boat.

Dr. Otts says that because he grew up as an only child, he loved having young residents around. “I got interested in their lives and how they were doing,” he says. “It was an honor to train these boys in our specialty. I enjoyed it as much as they did. Some of them came in and joined me in my practice when they got far enough along.”

Dr. Betty Ruth Speir was the only woman in the program when she was a resident in the mid-1960s. She began her residency at The University of Alabama, but interrupted it to cover her late father’s practice and hospital obligations during his illness. She credits Dr. Otts with enabling her to complete her training.

“He taught us the art of medicine as well as the science,” Dr. Speir says. “He had the ability to listen to patients and residents and taught residents to put

patients ahead of their egos, to say ‘I do not know’ and seek help if they didn’t have an immediate answer to a problem.”

Dr. Otts was an early and eager adopter of new technology if it could improve women’s care. He also saw that residents were sent to seminars and programs at places such as Harvard University so they could be exposed to noted lecturers and academic programs not available in Mobile. Former resident and later colleague Dr. Barry Wilson was part of a team that did the first laparoscopic gynecological surgery in Mobile—and probably the first in the state—because Dr. Otts allowed them to go to a seminar to learn the technique, Dr. Wilson recalls.

One word comes up often when family, students, and colleagues speak of honoring Dr. Otts: “deserving.”

“He’s a gracious guy who did a huge amount of good for the community,” Dr. Pierce says. “He thought people deserved good care and he made sure that was done.”


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