



In 1996, **Marcia Day Childress** – a literature scholar by training – became co-director of the UVA School of Medicine’s Humanities in Medicine Program, succeeding the program’s creator, Dr. Edward W. Hook. Although Childress had earlier fallen in love with medicine and even considered going to medical school, she had determined that humanities would remain her focus,

but she’d put her expertise to work inside medicine. And medical education at UVA is the richer for it.

For 25 years, 1996–2021, Childress led Programs in Humanities in what is now the Center for Health Humanities and Ethics, first as Co-director, then as Director, including humanities and arts courses and activities for medical students. Those same years, she produced the Medical Center Hour, the medical school’s weekly public forum on medicine, society, and health care, in continuous production now for more than 50 years.

Childress also founded the Edward W. Hook Scholars Program, a four-year track for medical students who wish to make humanities, ethics, or arts part of their pathway into medicine. Within

and beyond the medical school, she created interprofessional programs and public events featuring humanities and arts in relation to health, health care, and health professional education. Her awards included the Harrison Distinguished Medical Educator Award, the medical school’s lifetime achievement honor.

Childress’ commitment to the University included input on women’s issues and faculty governance. She served on and chaired the President’s Advisory Committee on Women’s Concerns from 1995–98 and was a member of the Task Force on the Status of Women at the University in 1999. She served on UVA’s Faculty Senate and chaired the Senate in 2004–05.

WHY DID YOU COME TO UVA?

In fall 1970, the same year undergraduate women first formally entered the College, I came to UVA as a graduate student in English. There were already women in the graduate schools and the nursing and education undergraduate schools, but UVA was a guy's place. Coming from a coed Big Ten university, I was charmed but also a little weirded out by UVA's climate.

In 1974, without a finished doctorate, I took a teaching position at Northwestern University. But after a year in the Midwest, I acutely missed the Virginia countryside. At the same time, I wasn't sure that I wanted to be the English professor I'd trained to be.

I was 27, owed no money, and had no entangling commitments, so I quit my teaching post, moved back to Charlottesville, and looked for any work to pay the bills. I was hired by Ed Hook, chair of the department of medicine, to handle special projects and edit medical professors' papers. I thought I'd do this for a year. But, to my surprise, I fell in love with medicine. I read medical textbooks and peppered physicians in offices near mine with questions (conveniently, my office was next to the men's room).

When I helped faculty prepare papers, they'd offer compensation. A bottle of wine? A check? Instead, I'd suggest, "Will you take me on rounds?" And they did. I even asked, once, "Will you take me to an autopsy?"

The one year I expected to work for Dr. Hook turned into 14. Whenever I proposed finding something else to do, he made my job more interesting.

In 1991, after retiring as department chair, Dr. Hook created UVA's medical humanities program. Senior medical students could take courses in literature, history, anthropology, religion, and film as these fields related to illness and giving or receiving medical care. When Dr. Hook asked me to design and teach Literature and Medicine, my real work began.

In 1995, the medical school dean approached me: "We'll appoint you the humanities program co-director [with physician colleague Julia Connelly], but first you must finish your dissertation and degree." With support from a great many people, especially a network of women colleagues, I did just that, earning my PhD in 1996.

These developments coincided with the rise of the hybrid disciplines now known as health humanities and narrative medicine. My preparation as a literature scholar, together with my knowledge of medicine and medical culture, fitted me perfectly to lead UVA's new initiatives.

HOW DO YOU THINK DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF YOUR IDENTITY, INCLUDING BEING A WOMAN, IMPACTED HOW PEOPLE RESPONDED TO YOU IN YOUR POSITION?

Because I was a humanities person, a literature scholar, and a woman in the medical school, I was a square peg in a round hole, fundamentally an outsider. First and foremost, I would never know what it was to be a physician. This sense of being an outsider – it was a barrier, but also an advantage, an opportunity.

For instance, I appreciate varieties of professional preparation. Professional training forms you in particular ways; it does things to your head, shapes how you think, instills certain values. For 20 years, a law professor and I have

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In Her Words | Marcia Day Childress, PhD

led a seminar for a mix of medical and law students. We read and discuss works of literature together. Future doctors and lawyers are “made” very differently by and for their respective professions; they notice and remark on this but also discover commonalities when they meet over a Greek tragedy or an edgy Argentinian short story.

My leadership of Medical Center Hour was deeply informed by my outsider status. For this public forum that welcomes persons from diverse pursuits, I created programs that bridged disciplines, explored contradictory viewpoints, aired controversy. Here’s a pressing bioethical issue, here’s someone who’s written a really cool book about it, here’s a savvy audience eager to weigh in – can we bring them together in a Medical Center Hour? Or, can we spotlight issues to spark institutional change? Programs on the burdens of climate change, for instance, helped launch a medical school course on climate change and health. In my last year as director, when COVID

intervened, we took Medical Center Hour online. COVID expert Dr. Anthony Fauci presented in November 2020 and 9,000 people tuned in via Zoom and YouTube.

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HOW DO YOU WANT TO BE REMEMBERED? WHAT LEGACY ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?

That the humanities and arts matter at the core of medical education. While humanities and arts are ways of understanding human experience – including illness, doctoring, and healing – they’re also ways of enabling doctors to acquire and practice essential skills: how to pay attention, listen and look closely, communicate clearly, be open and nonjudgmental, cultivate one’s reflective capabilities and sense of moral agency, tolerate ambiguity, and work amid uncertainty. Medical schools are turning to humanities and arts methods and materials to teach these skills, many of which aren’t best learned via lecture or modeling. One program I’m proudest of is Clinician’s Eye, a clinical skills workshop that we conduct in UVA’s Fralin Museum of Art using artworks on exhibit. Developed with the museum’s academic curator, Clinician’s Eye is a partnership between the Fralin and our Center for Health

Humanities and Ethics. UVA medical students complete this workshop in preparation for clinical work.

Health care professionals are themselves suffering during this pandemic. Humanities and arts offerings can help stressed clinicians better support themselves and one another. Here’s an example. When the pandemic began, the medical school needed remote coursework because upper-level students, sent home from the hospitals, still needed to earn credit toward graduation. So in late March 2020, my husband, ethicist Jim Childress, and I created *Confronting Epidemics – Perspectives from History, Ethics, and the Arts*, a two-week, remote-learning

course required of the classes of 2021 and 2022, 305 students. We spotlighted four previous pandemics—medieval Black Death, cholera in 19th century England, 1918-19 influenza, and HIV/AIDS—plus COVID, and helped students grasp how individuals, societies, and medicine and public health respond to epidemic disease. Besides introducing historical and ethical perspectives, *Confronting Epidemics* knit together students' professional and personal lives in ways that were, I think, helpful at a time of uncertainty for us all.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A WOMAN IN A SIMILAR POSITION TODAY?

Follow your interests, keep them lit and lively. Look for open doors. I tell students at decision points to look for doors that are ajar. Don't be afraid to go there, to push through, even if nobody's gone there before, or in a while.

I've worked my whole career with medical people for whom following diagnostic and therapeutic algorithms is central to what they're learning. Yet there always will be patient care scenarios in which the algorithm won't do the job. Physicians need the humanities and arts to help them stay curious, imaginative, and inventive, as well as trusting of their bioscientific and humanistic skillsets.

And last: don't just stay in your own lane. Reach across divides. It's a way to keep learning. Lawyers make jokes about doctors, doctors joke about lawyers, but give them the same book to read, gather them in your living room, and they find themselves talking meaningfully with each other. And they understand each other – and themselves – in new ways.

WHAT DOES WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP MEAN TO YOU?

What's gotten me through my career is sisterhood. Starting in the mid-1990s, seven of us medical school women anchored each other through significant formative professional and personal challenges. We got together every couple of months, often over dinner, but we were always on call for each other. Together, we broke new ground for women in the school and, just as important, we helped one another navigate career shifts, promotions, remarriage, illness, retirement. Often, leadership isn't an individual thing but a communal enterprise, being part of a "village" that conscientiously takes care of its own and in so doing makes life better for all.

One benefit of the Zintl Award has been serving on the selection committee, another "village." Through this committee's work, I've come to know well the award nominees – what they've done, sometimes quietly, how they've made their mark within their schools and at the university. UVA depends on the vision and achievements of women! Each year, the committee comes away from its deliberations having chosen an awardee but also joyfully celebrating UVA's remarkable community of women.



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