

Champion of diversity Hill to retire

by Carole Bartoo

George C. Hill, Ph.D., Levi Watkins Jr. Professor and Distinguished Professor of Pathology, Microbiology and Immunology and of Medical Education and Administration, will retire in September and will also step down as assistant vice chancellor for Multicultural Affairs and special assistant to the Provost and vice chancellor for Health Affairs.

He was recognized as a Professor Emeritus at Vanderbilt University's May Commencement after a decade of scientific discovery and the promotion of diversity in medicine and the sciences at Vanderbilt.

"Vanderbilt is a better place because of Dr. Hill's many accomplishments recruiting, mentoring and retaining the best and brightest underrepresented minority students. His contributions toward expanding the diversity of our School of Medicine have been transformative for both the school and for the University," said Jeff Balser, M.D., Ph.D., vice chancellor for Health Affairs and dean of the School of Medicine. "We wish him the very best as he begins this new chapter in life."

Hill advanced in his career as a world-renowned microbiologist, conducting research and leading numerous organizations dedicated to the sciences. Then he



George C. Hill, Ph.D.

increasingly dedicated himself to developing the next generation of physicians and scientists, especially those who overcame adversity and disparity. He had a strong desire to lift up others in the hopes they too would have the opportunity to serve as examples.

"Dr. Hill has been a terrific University citizen and his influence extends well beyond the Medical Center. I am especially grateful for his important contributions to our academic planning for premedical students and to his tireless support of diversity efforts across the campus," said Richard McCarty, Ph.D., Provost and vice chancellor for Academic Affairs.

Earlier this year, Hill returned to Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., to attend his induction into the Rutgers Hall of Distinguished Alumni. It was a return home.

Hill's twin brother Washington, a physician, also attended Rutgers, while their father worked for the U.S. Postal Service and their mother was a domestic worker. Hill and his sister, Mary Esther, a retired reading specialist, and brother were expected to attend college and to work hard.

But even as he achieved great success, he never forgot where he came from. He and his brother have made a sizable contribution to Rutgers to encourage minority students in Camden, N.J.

Hill graduated from Rutgers, Camden in 1961, and went on to receive his M.S. from Howard University in Washington, D.C., and his Ph.D. from New York University, New York City, where he launched his career in the biomedical sciences.

In the 1970s, Hill served as a National Institutes of Health (NIH) research fellow at the University of Cambridge, Great Britain. His lab at Colorado State University was the first to grow the infective protozoan that carries sleeping sickness. His work to characterize the protozoan gave scientists an opportunity to develop drugs to treat sleeping sickness, and was published in the leading scientific journal, *Science*. He also served as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Nairobi.

Hill received numerous recognitions for his contributions to biomedical science. He served as president for the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases, and received the organization's Utz Leadership Award; he received the Seymour Hunter Prize from the Society of Protozoologists; and served on the National Institute for General Medical Sciences Council and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Board of Scientific Counselors.

In 1998, Hill reached what many consider the pinnacle achievement for an academic scientist. He was elected to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies.

Later he was elected a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and of the American Academy of Microbiology.

Hill's style of leadership was based on a belief in hard work, balanced by support and mentorship. He was eager to engage young, developing scientists.

Before coming to Vanderbilt, he served 19 years in a variety of senior faculty and administrative roles at Meharry Medical College, including dean of the School of Graduate Studies and Research and

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vice president for Research.

In 2002 Hill was asked to lead Vanderbilt's first Office of Diversity in Medical Education. He turned to a much less charted course: the challenge of finding and attracting the best and brightest under-represented in medicine (URM) students to VUSM, making sure they flourished, developed leadership skills, and then set out to encourage others.

The goal was to build on and compound the number of URM students Vanderbilt would attract, long into the future. With effective collaboration and teamwork with colleagues, his efforts have been successful.

"Lonnie Burnett (the late professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Emeritus and former chair of the department) would put it this way: He would say we need a critical mass. When more and more are graduating, they will bring in more to the program. The number graduating this year was 16 of 98, the highest number yet." Hill said.

In the 11 years prior to Hill's arrival, only 21 URM had graduated from the VUSM with an M.D. degree. By 2011, Hill and his staff members, Ella Butler and Judith Allen, had produced a report showing that in the decade since their office opened, 89 URM students received their M.D. or M.D./Ph.D. degrees.

Currently ranked sixth among peer institutions for the training of URM physicians, Vanderbilt has great momentum. But Hill says challenges lie ahead.

"The AAMC (Association of American Medical Colleges) has numbers that indicate a reduction in the number of middle class applicants to medical schools, while the number of students who come from a higher income background is increasing. That's going to present a challenge as we go forward," Hill said.

Hill says diversity in medicine is not where it needs to be. According to the American College of Physicians, African-Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans make up more than 30 percent of the nation's population yet African-Americans account for only 6.3 percent of physicians, Hispanics, 5.5 percent, and Native Americans/Native Alaskans, 0.5 percent. "We must recognize more needs to be done and continue our focus," he said.

But Hill is encouraged by what he has seen in the last decade, and by what he has experienced in his lifetime.

He remains closely connected with the School of Medicine's first minority student, Levi Watkins Jr., M.D., who graduated in 1970, and saw to it that a lectureship in Watkins name would continue to honor Watkins and to bring in thought-leaders of color.

Similarly, Hill remains closely connected with students who have passed through the Office of Diversity, and often looks for ways to help them become visibly engaged. The walls of his office feature many framed copies of news articles about student achievements and honors.



Joe Howell

Training and mentoring future generations of physicians and scientists has always been a priority for George C. Hill, Ph.D.

"I have been blessed to mentor so many students and faculty," he said.

One such graduate is Vernon Rayford, M.D., Pharm. D., a 2009 VUSM graduate now pursuing a combined residency in medicine and pediatrics at Boston's Massachusetts General Hospital.

"My interaction with Dr. Hill and the office started even before I arrived at Vanderbilt. He was right there during my first visit for interviews. He and the other members of the Office of Diversity introduced me to other Vanderbilt students and made sure that all questions were answered. It was important because they took an interest in me even at that interview," he said.

"When it came time to talk about residencies, talking with Dr. Hill about where I wanted to go, he encouraged me that no place was off limits. The office was instrumental in me coming to Vanderbilt, my being very happy at Vanderbilt and now my being at Mass General, the place I wanted

to be."

Hill plans to continue his life's work after retirement, hoping to spend more time in Camden where he serves on the medical advisory board of Cooper Medical School of Rowan University, a new medical school focusing on developing leaders in primary care. He also serves on the NIH Fogarty International Center Scientific Advisory Board. But he will reduce the scale of the demands on his time.

Personal losses in recent years have brought Hill's family into greater focus. The loss in 2009 of his wife, Linda Hare, Ed. D., who devoted significant time to diversity activities at VUSM, and son Brian, in 2010, affected him deeply.

"It taught me you have to pursue your purpose and goals as life is short," Hill said, adding that he is looking forward to spending more time with his three children and five grandchildren.

"My goal is to take the grandkids on a safari and take photos as they enjoy the travel." □