

# Mentoring to Make a Difference: Alonzo Patterson, M.D.

by Mark Willis

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Alonzo Patterson, M.D., didn't know how he would find the time, but he wanted to "get involved and give something back." He took a day off from seeing patients in his busy pediatrics practice to look at his life in a different way.

"It made me think," he remembers. "African-American men in this country, as individuals, have more power than what we give ourselves credit for. Using that power in a well-coordinated, thought-out way can help affect change for people.

"And not just for black people," he adds. "Everyone in society benefits when people do positive things. When people celebrate who they are and where they come from, that helps all of us."

By the end of the day he made a decision that would begin to change the lives of young people in small but significant ways. You could say he became a role model, but he would tell you how the process is at once simpler — and not as simple — as that.

"It isn't about some celebrity standing up as a role model and telling you to do the right thing," he says. "What's important is having people in your life, like parents and grandparents, who have confidence in you."

Dr. Patterson decided to work part-time as a student advisor at Wright State University School of Medicine. Since 1995 he has set aside at least one day a week for Wright State medical students while maintaining his private practice with the Ohio Valley Medical Group in Huber Heights. Most recently he was appointed assistant dean for minority affairs at the School of Medicine, succeeding Jacqueline McMillan, who became executive assistant to Wright State President Kim Goldenberg.

The path of Alonzo Patterson's medical career began at Wright State almost twenty years ago. In the summer of 1979, after his junior year at Wilbur Wright High School in Dayton, he came to Wright State for a pioneering educational initiative called Horizons in Medicine.

A six-week summer program, Horizons was designed to give minority and disadvantaged high school students a sense of the career possibilities in health care and to show them the kind of serious preparation needed to enter those careers. Students spent mornings studying in classrooms and labs at Wright State and afternoons working in hospitals and community clinics affiliated with the School of Medicine.

Few educational initiatives have stood the test of time as well as Horizons in Medicine, which celebrated its 20th anniversary last August. Since 1979, 33 Horizons alumni have earned M.D. degrees, and another 17 are enrolled now in medical school. A total of 368 high school students have completed Horizons in Medicine; 336 (94 percent of eligible students) have entered college, and 215 (79 percent of eligible students) have graduated from college.

"I realized the impact Horizons made on me when I became a freshman in college. The chemistry textbook in college was the same one we used in Horizons in Medicine," Dr. Patterson remembers. "Kids have to keep their eyes and ears open for opportunities like Horizons. Those opportunities may not be glamorous or star-studded, but if they help you get where you want to be, they're worthwhile," he adds.

Dr. Patterson delivers the same message in his pediatrics practice. "I emphasize to parents that

learning opportunities surround us every day. That includes what we do with our kids — the toys we buy them, the games we play with them. We have to make learning part of everything we do in life.”

Now the Horizons graduate is both a mentor and an advocate for minority medical students at Wright State. “I help students see where they’re at now and where they’re trying to go,” he explains. “Mentoring is not something done only by one person. Mentoring is done by a community of people. From this person I get the strength to just hold on. From that person I get the knowledge I need to get ahead. From another I get the contacts to know what direction to go in.

“Mentoring medical students is a way to touch the lives of some who will go out and touch the lives of many more,” Dr. Patterson adds. “I think this is something I am here to do. You don’t have to do superlative or unusual things to get fulfillment out of life. Just do what you’re here to do.”