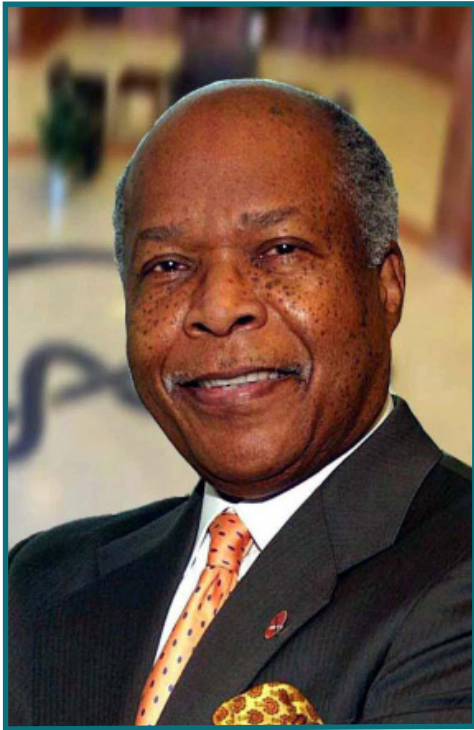


## MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS ORAL HISTORIES PROJECT

### LOUIS SULLIVAN

By Corrinne Fahl



Louis Sullivan, President Emeritus of the Morehouse School of Medicine and former Secretary of Health and Human Services, came very close to following a completely different path. After graduating from Morehouse College, Sullivan went on to Boston University for medical school. While he had been influenced by the lack of equity in access to care by communities of color in the region in which he grew up, he found a passion in medicine and research as he navigated through his educational experience. Sullivan joined the faculty of Boston University as a research hematologist and went on to establish the Hematology Service at Boston City Hospital, offering extensive resident training in addition to his own research.

Sullivan met and married his wife in Boston, and their three children were born in Massachusetts. During this time, they were both active in the Civil Rights Movement and took part in organizing within their congregation at Christ Church Cambridge. In August of 1963, they brought together a group of church members to travel to Washington, D.C. for the Civil Rights March. He also organized an alumni group to recruit undergraduates for Morehouse College from the Boston area.

When approached by the administration of Morehouse College in the late 1960s to serve on a committee to investigate the possibility of a medical school, he was a full professor at Boston University and focused on becoming chair of his department.

While the legacy of Morehouse was important to him, so was the future he saw in Boston, and the life he built there. He also knew that developing a medical school would be an enormous task for the college and for any person charged with guiding that development. There was the additional complication of curriculum development as the medical school would begin as a two-year program, with a plan to put in place a four-year curriculum per the requirements of their accrediting body, the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME). That included the clinical aspects of the program, which would be challenging to address.

Sullivan was one member of several on the committee, and the evaluation that they conducted on the creation of the medical school convinced him that it really was something that Morehouse College could do. When Morehouse asked him to be the first dean of the medical school, he had to seriously examine what he wanted his path forward to look like. He had gone to medical school with the idea of increasing the African American community's access to quality medical care, but his career had gone off in the direction of research and academia. In his own words:

I came to medical school with the goal of increasing the care available for Black patients and I ended up as a researcher, a very rewarding career, but this is something that is not exactly on target with what my ideas were coming to medical school in the first place. So I decided this was a challenge that was worth responding to. So that's how the college then recruited me back to develop the medical school. Because I felt if we were successful in developing the school, hopefully, the school would be around for centuries and train Black physicians as well as focusing on the health of the Black community to a much greater degree than I could really as an individual physician.

This commitment to the larger good, and to the longer-term benefit to society, played out both in Sullivan's time as Secretary of Health and Human Services and also in how he arrived at that position. Once he had agreed to serve as the Dean and later

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the President of the Morehouse School of Medicine, he threw himself into the administrative and fundraising tasks associated with the office. Beginning with then-Governor Jimmy Carter, Sullivan worked to increase awareness and support for the school. When Carter was elected President, suddenly Morehouse had a very important friend in national politics. The value of this connection was clear to Sullivan, so when Ronald Reagan was elected, he was invited to visit Morehouse for the dedication of a new building. While President Reagan was unable to attend, he sent his Vice President, George H. W. Bush. This solidified a relationship that would persist through Bush's presidency, leading directly to Sullivan's appointment as Secretary of Health and Human Services. Sullivan traveled to several African nations with Mr. Bush and his wife, and he connected with Mrs. Bush over their commitment to education. Sullivan later appointed Mrs. Bush to the board of the Medical School, cementing the connection between the School and the Bush family. Sullivan returned to Morehouse from Boston University with the hope of making a lasting contribution towards increasing minority health access; in pursuit of that, he was given an opportunity to benefit the health of an entire nation.

I think it's fair to say that he rose to the opportunity admirably. While Secretary, Sullivan created the Office of Research on Minority Health, which was later elevated to a center and then to an institute. He felt that:

[W]hen I became secretary we thought of this reality and the fact is I was fully aware from my days as a researcher and then as an administrator at Morehouse School of Medicine that institutes were developed that were quite broad in their purpose; the Cancer Institute, the Heart Institute, Infectious Disease Institute, those are disease oriented institutes in terms of their research but I saw the development of the National Institute for Nursing, the National Institute for Deafness, etc., so I said, well the health status of the African American community is much less than that of the White community, there are many needs, there are shortages of personnel, access to care, etc. we need an office that helps focus on that.

In the time since its creation, the Office of Research on Minority Health (now National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities) has offered substantial funding opportunities for research as well as professional development and loan repayment programs for minority health scholars.

When asked, in closing, if there was anything that we had not addressed, Sullivan pointed out the ongoing over complication of procuring funding for health initiatives. Reminding me of the incredibly strong research environment that the United States has created, and that "we have more Nobel Prizes in physiology and medicine throughout the course of the 20th century awarded to scientists in American laboratories, than in the rest of the world combined", he commented about the lack of understanding on the part of our legislators. That they seem, specifically, not to understand that investment in health programs creates value for the nation as a whole. A healthy populace is productive and pays taxes, they require less in terms of social programs. If he could communicate anything, it would be that these programs are essential, and benefit everyone.

## Minority Serving Institutions Oral History Project

*The MSI Oral History Project shares a glimpse into the lives of prominent scholars and leaders across the MSI landscape. This initiative was born out of a class titled "Understanding Minority Serving Institutions," in which students interviewed key figures in higher education who have led Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), work to advocate for MSI inclusion in larger discussion within higher education, or conduct MSI-related research. These important individuals range from faculty in higher education to MSI presidents to those working within nonprofit organizations that support MSIs.*