

Doctor finds her destiny in Texas prisons

By Mike Ward

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HUNTSVILLE - In the not-so-long-ago days when state prison medical care meant aspirin for heart attacks, felons performing emergency surgery on cellmates, and lockups that operated like plantations in the Old South, Lannette Linthicum came to Texas.

Her assignment was supposed to be temporary: Improve medical care for prisoners at the state's toughest prison, the century-old Walls Unit.

"It was a very different world, a world I had never experienced growing up," she recalled. "Some of the correctional officers called me 'that colored Yankee doctor.' I'd never been called a Yankee. And colored? Never."

So, she made a plan. After finishing her mandatory U.S. Public Health Service internship, she would return as soon as possible to the East Coast, where she grew up. Half a lifetime later, Linthicum is still here, working as medical director for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, in a health care system that has vastly improved under her tenure.

In 2017, she will become president of the American Correctional Association, the first medical doctor to lead the group founded in 1870 by future President Rutherford B. Hayes at a time when enlightened reform in some states consisted of not beating prisoners more than once a day.

"The State of Texas is blessed to have her here," said longtime Senate Criminal Justice Committee Chairman John Whitmire, D-Houston, who has worked with "Dr. L," as she is known to her friends, for years. "Her dedication and service is an amazing story."

Compassion from spirituality

Born in Baltimore, the oldest of five children, Linthicum grew up in a working-class, inner-city neighborhood, part of a close-knit family that at one point included four living generations. Her father was a clothing salesman, her mother a cosmetologist.

"I had a very poor background. Four sisters, two brothers," she said. "We'd be at church all day long, every Sunday. My great grandmother instilled spirituality in me. I think that's where I learned compassion."

Excelling in public schools, Linthicum received a scholarship that opened doors for her to get into Phillips Exeter, a highbrow prep school in New Hampshire, and then into Smith College, a private liberal arts school in Massachusetts, where she majored in French, literature and biochemistry.

"As I started to take biology courses and classes like organic chemistry, it really made me come alive," she said, noting that she had intended to become a teacher when she started college. "I realized that



Photo: Alicea Kirkland

Lannette Linthicum is medical director of Texas' Department of Criminal Justice.

being a physician is being a teacher because you have to teach your patients how to take care of themselves."

After graduation, she returned home to get her medical degree at the University of Maryland, planning to work as a general practitioner in the kind of inner-city Baltimore neighborhoods where she grew up. But because she got her degree through the National Health Service Corps program, a federal program that allows graduates to pay off their student loans by working in under-served communities, Linthicum had to give back four years' service.

Her assignment: Texas.

At the time, the state's prisons were facing federal court sanctions for poor medical care in what was the most far-reaching lawsuit on prison conditions in American history.

"When they told me I was assigned to Texas, I thought I would go to an inner-city area in Houston or Dallas, but not to a prison," she said. "There were 20 of us and, because that was where the state's greatest need was at the time, they assigned all of us to the prison system."

Linthicum was sent to Huntsville, a Piney Woods city about 70 miles north of Houston, to work at the Walls Unit, which opened in 1848, and houses Texas' death row and execution chamber. Time and again she heard white staff members use racial slurs to refer to black inmates.

"Huntsville was definitely an eye-opener, let me say it that way," she said. "I'd never been in a prison before. My great grandmother told my mother she thought she was crazy and a fool for letting me go to Texas."

Vietnam-era medics

At the prison infirmary, Linthicum found rudimentary care and a system struggling to keep up, where Vietnam-era medics served as doctors because real physicians were in such short supply. She was one of two doctors at the prison.

"I prayed a lot in those days," she recalled.

Behind her desk was a calendar where she crossed off the days until her service ended.

"Sometimes I got very discouraged, but I knew this was where I had to be," Linthicum said. "I took a lot of weekend trips back to Baltimore. If you didn't go the site where you were assigned, you had to pay back three times the money that was spent on your education. That made it impossible for me to do anything but stay."

With interest, tripling her debt would have amounted to well over \$600,000.

"Inmates would come in and see the X's on the calendar in my office," she said. "I told them, 'I'm doing time here just like you are.'"

Those who knew her in those days said she also proved she was just as tough as the convicts. If she gave a medical pass to excuse an inmate from work and later saw him playing basketball, you could count on her to run out to the prison yard to revoke the pass.

Slowly, she made improvements in the access convicts had to medical care and in the quality of the care - two key goals of the federal court supervision.

"I've never seen anyone as driven as she is, anyone as sincerely concerned with providing proper medical care to inmates," said former state Rep. Allen Hightower, a Democrat who represented Huntsville from 1983 until 1999. For most of those years, he chaired the powerful House Corrections Committee. "Without her, we wouldn't have been able to create the system we have now, a long ways from what we had back in the bad, old days. I'm convinced of that."

Hightower, a self-professed "East Texas redneck" who worked as a game warden before being elected to the Legislature, said he also was impressed with Linthicum's soft-spoken patience, "how she learned how to absorb things in the South, as an African-American woman from Baltimore, that a lot of other people wouldn't have.

"She has determined strength," he said.

Over time, Linthicum said, she came to see the job as her calling.

"I went to medical school wanting to serve an under-served population, and this was an under-served population," she said. "We were making so many strides. We were doing a lot of good work."

Kept staying on

When she completed her service time in 1990, prison officials convinced her to stay on to help the state meet new benchmarks for health care. Same when the system moved to a new model of managed health care. Same when Texas exited the most far-reaching federal lawsuit over prison conditions in 2002.

By then, the Baltimore girl who was the first in her family to finish college and the first to become a doctor, had risen through the ranks to become medical director for the entire Texas prison system, then the largest state corrections system in the United States, with nearly 160,000 convicts in 112 prisons.

At age 57, she plans to stay until her retirement.

Known for her polite, straight-talking manner, addressing most everyone as Mr. or Mrs., Linthicum is an avid reader and active worker in ministries at the New Light Christian Center, a mega-church she attends in Houston.

Still, most of her time, she says, is spent on work and professional activities.

"After a time," she said, "I knew this was my destiny."

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