

CHARLETA GUILLORY, M.D.

Saving the babies!  
Committed physician and teacher personifies compassion and care

by Michelle Leigh Smith

Everyday Dr. Charleta Guillory works to save babies who were, as she puts it, “born too soon.”

A pioneer in her field, Dr. Guillory is an Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine and Associate Director of Neonatal Level II Nurseries at Texas Children’s Hospital, home to the largest Neonatal Intensive Care Unit in the country. She is also an active spokeswoman and advocate for greater access to resources for all children, not withstanding their color or socioeconomic background. As a life-long volunteer for the March of Dimes, Dr. Guillory is truly supporting the mission to save babies born too soon.

“The United States has an unspeakable infant mortality rate with more than 22 countries ranking ahead of our own,” Dr. Guillory says. “Also, African-American infants are more than twice as likely to die in the first year of life than white infants.

“To me, it’s natural for organizations like the March of Dimes to speak out for babies who are born prematurely. They are our most vulnerable population who have no voice,” says Dr. Guillory. “I am dedicated with the March of Dimes to find a cure for prematurity. There are times we are unable to change the outcome for these babies, but we can be there to help support their families.”

Growing up in the 1960s, Dr. Guillory noticed the disparity of health care early on. “I am committed to make sure everybody — especially those without insurance — have access not just to health care but to equal, good, solid health care,” she says. “Compared with insured children, uninsured children are more likely to be sick as newborns and less likely to be immunized at appropriate ages.”

Dr. Guillory’s mother was a teacher and school principal, so her exposure to the teaching profession came at an early age. Excellence in education was the common theme in her family.

Guillory recalls. “I remember many nights after reciting timetables and preparing for the daily spelling bee, helping my mother cut, paste and color alphabets, numbers, animals and combination of vowels and consonants she needed for work the next day. She would spend long hours writing information in students’ folders, identifying the students who had not mastered certain skills or lacked self-confidence and those who excelled and required more challenging assignments. I also observed the methods she used to stimulate, motivate and enhance the needs of her students.

“Little did I know, I was getting a free, unsupervised and unaccredited course in curriculum development and student teaching from a superior and dedicated teacher that would impact my teaching ideology,” says Dr. Guillory. “My mother taught by example, and this model gave me the confidence to dream I could actually become a doctor, in spite of being a little Black girl growing up in Louisiana. I dared believe I could be the first Black female to attend the Louisiana State University Medical School and, amazingly, I did.”

Before going on to LSU, Dr. Guillory earned her undergraduate degree in Biology from the University of Southwestern Louisiana in the city of Lafayette. Afterwards, she completed her pediatric residency at the Louisiana State Medical University Center, with a neonatal-perinatal fellowship at Baylor College of Medicine. In 2000, Dr. Guillory was one of six physicians to receive the Robert Wood Johnson Health Fellows Award from The Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences for Outstanding Health Science Professionals. As a recipient, she served as a legislative assistant to the United States Senate (office of Senator John B. Breaux) promoting both health policy legislation and programs.

“I’ve never seen a doctor who is more thorough,” says Karen Hughes, LVN a nurse who works the evening shift in the Neonatal Nursery at TCH. “Dr. Guillory will not let a child leave the hospital unless she is sure the parents understand everything they need to know about the feeding tube or ventilator, whatever assisting device the child may need.”

One might expect the fight for superior education and career opportunity would harden the person in that struggle. Not so in the case of Dr. Guillory. She retains a gentle, soft demeanor that makes her a favorite among her staff and the parents of her tiny patients. Don’t be fooled by her quiet demeanor. Dr. Guillory is determined to lower the number of premature births in Texas and the U.S. Each year this affects half a million babies — one in eight pregnancies.

Dr. Guillory was recently named the March of Dimes Texas Leadership Volunteer of the Year. She earned that distinction in part because of the key roles she played in statewide advocacy to promote Texas Public Affairs and Programs, as well as the Texas Prematurity Campaign. She led the Texas March of Dimes Public Affairs Committee to implement a series of 16 community forums about the issues of the uninsured in her early years, and she lobbied Texas Congressional members at the March of Dimes National Public Affairs Conference to support the Birth Defects Bill, allowing continued support for research and improved health insurance for children and organized state public policy meetings as Chairman of the Public Affairs Committee of the March of Dimes. She also helped draft two senate bills that were later incorporated into the Children’s Health Bill Act, 1999-2000.

More recently, she spoke before the Texas Legislature to heighten the issues surrounding the need for increased Newborn Screening. Dr. Guillory was instrumental to the success of the Texas Newborn Screening Bill passage to increase the total number of screening disorders to 27 — which will be implemented in November.

She has performed countless NICU-Neonatal Intensive Care tours at Texas Children's to benefit March of Dimes as they communicate with hundreds of corporate sponsors for Walk-America. Texas Children's Hospital raises over \$50,000 for WalkAmerica each year, and Dr. Guillory is key to that effort.

According to Dr. Ann R. Stark, Head of the Section of Neonatology, Professor of Pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine, who also serves on the National March of Dimes Scientific Advisory Committee of Prematurity,

“Charleta's broad-based commitment to community service is evident through her significant contributions as a Baylor College of Medicine and Texas Children's Hospital neonatologist. She is a medical advisor for the Texas March of Dimes State Prematurity Campaign where she works on education and public awareness of the possible preventable causes of prematurity. She has been a passionate advocate for the transition of premature NICU graduates back to community care,” said Dr. Stark.

Dr. Guillory was instrumental in the development and implementation of the Texas March of Dimes Prematurity Campaign and the First Faith-based African-American Summit, a faith-based education initiative. The Prematurity Campaign and the African-American Summit, presented at local churches, emphasized the importance of good prenatal care and close monitoring of high-risk pregnancies to combat infant mortality and morbidity.

“This endeavor exemplifies my unwavering desire to forge the interaction of the medical civic and religious communities and other members of society to address health education issues affecting minorities and underserved communities,” said Dr. Guillory.

“March of Dimes is extremely proud to recognize Dr. Charleta Guillory as the Texas Volunteer of the Year,” says Ernestine Pina-Sandoval, the Director of Communications and Marketing for the Texas March of Dimes – Houston Division. “Her leadership has enabled us to lobby successfully for expanded newborn screening so more babies with certain life-threatening metabolic disorders could be diagnosed and treated promptly. Additionally, through Dr. Guillory's dedication to our mission to save babies, she has helped lead the way as the PREEMIE Act Signature Cards were greatly needed. She set up shop at Texas Children's Hospital to gain even more signatures to be sent to Washington. Recently, the PREEMIE Bill passed the U.S. Senate with a unanimous vote. In the aftermath of the Gulf Coast hurricanes, the March of Dimes helped sick and premature babies evacuated from New Orleans. Dr. Guillory distributed supplies to families and treated many of these patients. Perseverance is a quality Dr. Guillory shares with the March of Dimes, and for that we are so thankful.”

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