

## Visionary Leadership

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One of the qualities of great leaders is vision. They see opportunities where others only see obstacles, and they are able to motivate others to act on the vision. Leadership guru Warren Bennis noted that, "Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality." Dr. Aaron Shirley is that kind of leader. He has devoted his life to rural and urban health care in Mississippi. He completed his undergraduate studies at Tougaloo College, and received his medical degree from Meharry Medical College in Nashville, TN. Dr. Shirley completed an internship at Hubbard Hospital before completing his residency in pediatrics in 1967 at the University of Mississippi Medical Center (UMMC). His list of achievements is long including co-developing the largest community health center in Mississippi, and initiating a comprehensive health clinic within an inner city school. One of his greatest achievements was the vision to develop the Jackson Medical Mall.

I remember going to the Jackson Mall as a child before it closed its doors in 1978. As many know, the Mall's major tenants moved out and moved to the suburbs leaving a large and virtually vacant building. In 1995, where others saw a problem, Dr. Shirley saw an opportunity. He had been looking for a new home for the Jackson/Hinds Health Center, and he thought the Jackson Mall would be the perfect spot. However, the Mall had almost 900,000 sq. ft., and he only needed about 35,000 sq. ft. for the Health Center. He teamed up with Reuben Anderson and Ted Woodrell and they incredibly lined up enough tenants over a ninety day period to get bank financing to close the deal to purchase the Jackson Mall from its original owners. The three of them believed so much in the project that they personally borrowed \$3 million to provide the last amount of financing needed to complete the transaction. Anderson's law partner Delbert Hoseman helped coordinate the tax advantageous structure of the purchase and the formation of the Jackson Medical Mall Foundation (JMMF). The original tenants included UMMC, the City of Jackson, Jackson State University, and the State Department of Health.

While Dr. Shirley's vision was originally about expanding health care for Mississippi's citizens, the Medical Mall has also had the effect of being a catalytic driver of economic development. Today, the Medical Mall has five anchor tenants and is over 99% occupied. JMMF, which owns and operates the Medical Mall, brings in over \$12 million in annual revenue from its operations. The Medical Mall's tenants employ approximately 3,000 people and over 4,000 people visit there each day. Dr. Shirley illustrated for me the change over the last 15 years by pointing me to a Google Earth picture of the Medical Mall in 1995, with its vast vacant parking lot, and a current day picture with the lot full of cars. The day I met with Dr. Shirley, the parking lot was packed and the Medical Mall was humming with activity. Today, the Medical Mall is a state of the art health care facility serving not only the local community, but also people throughout the state. The Medical Mall has also achieved national recognition as a pioneering facility, and people from across the country have come to learn about this innovative model.

What is particularly interesting to me about the Medical Mall is the powerful economic impact it is having on the community. As Primus Wheeler, the Executive Director of the JMFF has noted, "the

Medical Mall is a vehicle for change.” The opportunity is ripe for businesses to continue to grow and prosper in the neighboring community to the Medical Mall.

When you observe the amount of activity and progress at the Medical Mall today, it is amazing to think about how this all started with a dinner conversation between Dr. Shirley and Reuben Anderson fifteen years ago at the Piccadilly. It takes courage and perseverance to truly act on a vision. Dr. Shirley has inspired many people by his example over the years and the courage which he has faced challenging obstacles in pursuit of his mission of a better Mississippi. While it would be easy to rest on his success, he is busy planning the future of the Jackson Medical Mall and exploring a new concept for rural health care based on “health houses.” This is an idea that he learned from Iran where it has been extremely helpful in bridging the gap in disparity in health services. If history is any lesson, I expect that soon we will be hearing a lot more about this new model as Dr. Shirley continues his visionary leadership. As for the Medical Mall, I think we all need to take note of the success of this project, and consider how we can continue to accelerate and develop projects like this where Mississippi can be leading the way.

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