



Every issue of *Healthy Living* throughout 2012 features St. Mary's County individuals or families whose story has a connecting thread that links our county and our hospital histories together. You'll read about changes as seen through their eyes or marked through their experiences. In this issue we are pleased to spotlight the Thompson family of Valley Lee, Maryland.



## Fostering Change

*The Thompson family of Valley Lee*

"We were Dr. Bean babies," stated Elfreda Talbert Mathis and her sister, Janice Talbert Walthour. They are, of course, referring to Dr. Philip Bean who first began practicing in the county in 1914 and continued on through the 1970s. "He delivered us at the home of our grandparents, William Bunton and Ella Hawkins Thompson of Valley Lee."

Dr. Bean was also the doctor they visited when they were really sick. "There was no segregation in the doctor's office," said Elfreda. "It was simply first come, first served."

Janice recalled how they would get to the office as early as possible. It didn't matter who you were or where you came from because everyone kept tabs on who was next to be called in from the waiting room. "Everyone waited their proper turn," she said. Elfreda also added how all the sick kids would stay outside and "play by a

big oak tree. I don't know if it was the fresh air or what, but by the time we'd get in to see Dr. Bean we were healed."

"Everyone wanted to go to Dr. Bean because he only charged \$2 a visit no matter what," Elfreda said. Although there was no discrimination in the doctor's office, she said it still existed in other aspects of the community such as the schools, lunch counters and movie theaters and even at the hospital. "Dr. Bean's office was in direct contrast to the real world."

Their parents, Fred and Jeanette Thompson Talbert, raised the sisters in a family dedicated to education, community and a quiet, diplomatic approach to activism. "We grew up knowing no other way," said Janice. "It was all about faith and family and still is," said Elfreda, whose father, Fred, was one of the first blacks to be hired at the Navy base. It was also about grabbing the opportunities that came

along. Their Uncle Leroy Thompson knew how to do just that.

The sisters tell the story about Elinor Peabody, a hospital volunteer and fundraiser, and how she approached their uncle to help her raise money in their community. Uncle Leroy was a businessman and a community activist. The sisters said that when Elinor asked for his help to raise funds for a new wing on the old hospital, their uncle told her he would raise the money she needed. However, in return, he told Elinor that "things would have to change." Blacks would have to be allowed to come in the hospital's front door and not the back fire escape entrance when visiting someone. Things did change at the hospital and county wide.

"You never know where life will lead you," commented Elfreda, who became a member of the St. Mary's Hospital Board of Directors years

later. Janice had also served on the board, completing her service just as the new hospital was ready to be built. Both women relished their time on the board. They each described the experience as “wonderful and adding to their community perspective.”

Elfreda especially liked that she came onto the board at a time of transition and the focus was on long-range planning. “We looked at the future technology needs and discussed the electronic medical records, management protocols and staff development,” she said. “Much of the information was data driven to measure successes and challenges.”

She liked the data driven approach of the hospital leadership. “You could look at the data and say ‘this is what we do well’ and ‘these are the challenges’ and we’d addressed the challenges and how to improve.”

Studying the data greatly appealed to the retired teacher and principal who began her teaching career in 1967 at Piney Point Elementary, the first year of desegregation in the county school system. Mathis retired as principal of Lexington Park Elementary School in 2004 after 13 years. Prior to that, she served as principal of Ridge Elementary for 12 years.

Janice said that the hospital model of leadership was later introduced into the education community to further develop teaching and learning. She also worked in the county’s public schools for 36 years as a teacher, assistant principal, principal and coordinator of academic intervention programs. She served as principal of George Washington Carver

Elementary School for 15 years.

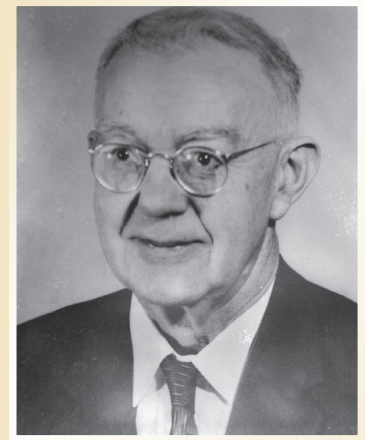
Elfreda thinks that St. Mary’s County has “to be among the top places in the world for volunteerism and for reaching out to others in need.” She worried that things would change as the county continues to grow. Fortunately, she thinks that “even the newcomers are capturing this spirit of community.”

Both sisters pointed out how they find this helpful attitude no matter where you go in the hospital, too. “This hospital has moved further into the future than many other institutions in the county,” said Elfreda. “All you have to do is look around. There are people of all faiths, colors and nationalities working here.”

That wasn’t always the case in the county. In the mid-1950s the women’s father worked with a community health club that wanted to find an African American physician to serve the community. They reached out to friends and neighbors and an office site was secured in Carver Heights, an all black neighborhood where all of the families had members who either worked in Civil Service or were in the U.S. Military stationed at Pax River.

The health club members made contributions to a health savings plan, their precursor to the Affordable Healthcare Act that was similar to what Health Share is today. “Everyone contributed to the plan,” said Elfreda. “The funds were then used to help families with critical health issues pay for medical bills.” Fundraisers were also held so an African American physician could come here and get help setting up a practice.

“Our parents and others helped



“We were Dr. Bean babies,” stated Elfreda Talbert Mathis and her sister, Janice Talbert Walthour. They are, of course, referring to Dr. Philip Bean who first began practicing in the county in 1914 and continued on through the 1970s.

in the recruitment of Dr. Johnson, a graduate of the Howard University School of Medicine. He loved it here and had a growing and mixed practice with patients of all colors because he was so inexpensive.” Elfreda and Janice both remembered how Mrs. Lane, the nursing supervisor from the hospital, donated her late husband’s medical equipment to Dr. Johnson to help him get started. However, his wife didn’t care for the area and never moved down here so he eventually moved back to her.

“We watched all of this going on while growing up in the county,” said Elfreda. Over time the two women became advocates for the hospital and for the patients, always thinking about what is best for the community they grew up in and still hold so dear.

Although the families will continue on for generations to come, this is the final piece in our hospital’s Centennial Celebration of Family Ties published in *Healthy Living*. This special series focused on families whose stories link our county and our hospital histories together. Our sincere appreciation goes to all who were interviewed and photographed. We also extend our thanks to the following for sharing your stories with our community.

The Wood Family  
The Thompson Family of Hollywood

The Bowes Family  
The Mason/Holt Family

The Burch Family  
The Thompson Family of Valley Lee