



Joseph L. Henry

May 2, 1924 – October 11, 2011



Nothing about Joseph L. Henry was ordinary. In his academic career he excelled noticeably above others -- as a student, teacher, department chair, dean, board member, national policy advisor, and as a mentor to many health professionals and policy makers.

The valedictorian of every class in every school he attended, Joe Henry routinely completed the graduation requirements years ahead of schedule and moved up to the next academic challenge. He completed high school in New Orleans at age 15, Xavier College at age 18, Howard College of Dentistry at age 22, and then, while on the Howard Faculty, a Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at age 26.

Joe Henry's national prominence was quickly felt in Washington, D.C. as he rose through the Howard University academic ranks from Instructor to Professor. In these years he served as the Director of Clinics and Coordinator of Research at the Howard College of Dentistry. When he became the Dean in 1966, he was much looked to as a national

health policy leader, having served on several White House Conferences and a number of select national advisory committees for the VA, HRSA, NIH, DOD, and health professions schools across the country. Among many other honors, Professor Henry was elected to the Institute of Medicine and served on committees for several of their studies including The Future of Dental Education report which advised the closer integration of medicine and dentistry. The White House called on his service three times, not as a leader in dentistry or the health professions, but as a national figure known for his ability to grasp major issues. Accordingly, the White House asked him to serve on the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health, the White House Conference on Employment of the Handicapped, and the White House Conference on International Relations.

*In tribute to their dedicated efforts to science and medicine, deceased members of the Harvard Faculty of Medicine (those at the rank of full or emeritus professor) receive a review of their life and contributions with a complete reflection, a **Memorial Minute**.*

Dr. Henry was a national leader, but he was often found championing local city and neighborhood causes. His commitment to his local community was strongly evident wherever he lived. The Mayors of both the City of New Orleans and of Washington, D.C. celebrated Joseph L. Henry day in 1965 for Joe's significant and valuable service to their communities and to the local government, in grateful acknowledgment of his many acts of service.

In 1975, Dean Paul Goldhaber recruited Joe Henry to Harvard University to become Professor of Oral Medicine, Department Chair and Associate Dean for External Affairs. He was the first black professor on the Harvard School of Dental Medicine faculty, and one of only two at that time on the Harvard Medical Faculty.

From July 1990 to June 1991, Joe served as Interim Dean of the Harvard School of Dental Medicine. At that time, there were serious discussions within the Harvard Medical Area to close the dental pre-doctoral program. Joe Henry's effective leadership during that transition period, secured the future of the Harvard School of Dental Medicine, and allowed it to retain its position as the first dental school established within a University setting. His mentoring of students and junior faculty at Harvard during those years resulted in many who are now serving throughout the nation and world as productive faculty members, innovative deans and executive directors of important national and international professional associations.

Joe's innate understanding of people served him well as a mentor. He was a master of timing his advice: timing of mentoring within a career, timing of incremental steps taken in social justice actions, timing of organizational changes, and timing for leadership transitions. Those who were mentored by Dr. Henry during times of stress, were often challenged by Joe to "make the best of it", to "pull yourself together, focus, and apply your skills." Joe Henry believed for all of us, that every achievement involves overcoming some adversity and that breaking through those barriers is what makes the accomplishment satisfying. With this supportive, but "you must rise to the occasion" attitude, Joe stimulated many students and colleagues to try harder and do better than we might have without his mentoring.

Joe Henry was a calm but persistent leader within his profession during the Civil Rights Movement. Being the first African American to break through a number of professional barriers, he carried the civil rights movement into the health professions. In 1968, Dr. Henry established a dental clinic at Resurrection City, the tent city in D.C., as part of the Poor People's Campaign initiated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He mentored hundreds of "up and coming" men and women of color throughout the health professions, including among many others, the first African American woman to become dean of a U.S. school of dentistry. Dr. Henry believed in the importance of mentoring and cared about the academic and career advancement of students, trainees and junior faculty without regard to race, ethnicity or gender. He was the consummate teacher, clinician, researcher and role model.

Joe Henry was a nationally ranked contract bridge player. He combined his steady activism as a civil rights leader with his massive intellectual ability to desegregate the bridge playing world. From 1952 to 1967, he was the leading American Bridge Association (ABA) player, which was the national association of black bridge players. As a young Howard University faculty member, Joe Henry led the effort to integrate the American Contract Bridge League (ACBL), which did not accept blacks as members or players. Finally, after years of debates, motions and efforts to register for competitions, the Washington D.C. local chapter of the ACBL voted, in 1961, to admit blacks, just in time for the ACBL Summer National Tournament held that year in Washington D.C. The black players wasted no time

making their presence felt. Joe Henry's team finished second in the Sub-Senior Masters. Then, in 1962, Joe Henry led a team to a national title at the ACBL Nationals.

Often, when Professor Henry advised and mentored, he did it in association with food. Joe Henry's culinary skills were central to many of his most meaningful personal interactions. Literally thousands of students, faculty, friends and leaders in national decision making positions have enjoyed his home-made New Orleans Creole gumbo, prepared with special ingredients flown in from Louisiana and Maryland. An invitation to an evening featuring Joe Henry's gumbo was a valued invitation, and his home was open on Sunday afternoons for students and their families to enjoy.

Joe Henry did not discriminate or hold back in his interactions with others. He was tall and elegant and greeted everyone with a gracious familiarity. He had a wry sense of humor, and managed to deliver his points of view with a straight face and a twinkle in his eye. He knew the family histories of everyone, regardless of who they were, or their position within the school. Joe's leadership style taught us that we were all contributors to the school environment, and our primary purpose was to improve the lives of others.

Joseph Henry knew the importance of loyalty. He was, in particular, a dedicated and loyal advisor, and thus was sought out to serve in this capacity by many colleagues, decision makers, government leaders and institutional boards. His skillful mentoring, visionary leadership and dependable loyalty resulted in many leaders who were grateful for his contributions which resulted in literally hundreds of awards, statements of appreciation and several honorary degrees.

The Joseph L. Henry Oral Health Fellowship in Minority Health Policy has been established at Harvard Medical School by Delta Dental and private contributors. This Fellowship continues his legacy by providing resources for the next generation of leaders who will improve the capacity of the health care system to address the health needs of minority and disadvantaged populations.

Joseph L. Henry lived what he taught: that health professionals should be clinically competent, civically active, politically informed and serve the community with a socially conscious commitment. Nothing about Joseph L. Henry was ordinary. He stood head and shoulders above most of us. And he was equal in his career achievements to the very best of us.

Respectfully Submitted,

Memorial Minute Committee

Chester Douglass, *Chair*

Leon Dogon

Bruce Donoff, Dean, Harvard School of Dental Medicine

Christopher Fox

Walter Guralnick

Leonard Kaban

Linda Niessen

Joan Reede

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