



Dr. Charles T. Lunsford, once called ‘the Martin Luther King’ of Rochester, stands in the waiting room of his office at 572 Clarissa St. He was Rochester’s first Black doctor and served underprivileged communities for more than 50 years. ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTOS

# ‘From the day I got here, I started fighting’

## Rochester’s first Black doctor spent a lifetime working for equality

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School 19 in Rochester is named for Dr. Charles T. Lunsford, the first Black doctor to establish a practice in the city.

His lofty accomplishments beyond that — and there are many — were not as well known to the students at the school that bears his name, Principal Moniek Silas-Lee said in a 2020 Democrat and Chronicle story.

“They do know he was the first African American doctor, and they should be able to ID him in a picture, but that’s about it,” said Silas-Lee, who was aiming to change that.

At the Seward Street school, presentations were held twice monthly to discuss Lunsford, said Silas-Lee, adding that her father was a patient.

Lunsford set up shop on Clarissa Street in 1921 and practiced medicine for more than half a century. Along the way, he was a tireless advocate for all kinds of civil rights issues, so much so that when he died, he was referred to as the “Martin Luther King of Rochester.”

Lunsford fought successfully to enroll black students at the University of Rochester medical school. He helped to integrate the workforce of companies such as Eastman Kodak Co. and the guestrooms of the local YMCA. During World War II, Lunsford helped overturn an American Red Cross policy of not accepting the blood of black donors.

He served as president of the local NAACP chapter and hosted a reception for King when he visited Rochester. Lunsford did all that and more while nurturing his reputation as a “country doctor” who cared for anyone, anytime, regardless of their ability to pay.

“From the day I got here, I started fighting,” Lunsford once said. “I spent my lifetime fighting for the underprivileged.”

A native of Georgia and the grandson of a slave, Lunsford came to Rochester after studying at Howard University. Months after arriving in 1921, he diagnosed a case of smallpox and medical officials credited him with saving the city from an epidemic.



Dr. Charles Lunsford and his wife, Nan, at a testimonial dinner at the Mapledale Party House in honor of his retirement.

Lunsford said he didn’t set out to become the civil rights champion that he became, but the prejudice he encountered left him no choice. In a 1972 Upstate magazine article, Lunsford said that when he first got here, “I was greeted with ... ‘No (N-word) doctor will ever cross my doorstep.’ You have to feel that to understand it.”

Lunsford was a key witness when a state legislative committee on discrimination held hearings here in the 1930s. He was cited by then-Gov. W. Averell Harriman in the 1950s for his struggle against racial discrimination in public places, housing and employment. When School 19 was named for him in 1973, it was reported that it was the first time a local school was named for a living person.

Lunsford moved his practice from Clarissa Street to South Plymouth Avenue in the 1970s because of urban renewal. He retired in 1978.

More than 1,000 well-wishers attended a testimonial dinner for Lunsford the year that he retired.

“There’s been a revolution in Rochester, and I’m proud to be a part of it,” he said at the dinner. “Thank God we’re still fighting and dreaming.”

He died, at age 93, in 1985.

Alan Morrell is a former Democrat and Chronicle reporter and a freelance writer. This story was originally published in February 2020 as part of the RocRoots series.