

HEALTH

Reality Check

Black surgeon's can-do message envisions kids' futures beyond sports and music

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MCT WIRE SERVICE

DETROIT
If Dr. Roderick Claybrooks had his way, academic superstars would be as popular as "American Idol" and as publicized as the Super Bowl.

It pains him that many youths — especially African-American boys and girls — see entertainment or athletics as their only ticket to success.

"You have a much better chance of becoming a surgeon than of becoming the next Kobe Bryant," Claybrooks, a spine surgeon, tells them.

To which he often gets a puzzled look. But Claybrooks, 36, doesn't back down. He backs it up with numbers. He says there are about 400 men playing in the NBA, but hundreds of thousands of doctors. There are 921,904 physicians, including 161,370 surgeons, in the United States, according to the American Medical Association.

"An education, a good education, is the surest ticket out of the ghetto," Claybrooks says emphatically.

He knows because, although he didn't grow up poor, education opened doors to opportunities he would have had no other way.

He's so convinced of it that he wrote "The Black Student's Guide to Success" and published it himself late last year.

Claybrooks says he was driven to write the book because it bothered him that so many kids he talked to had limited aspirations and many people he treated had promise but were doing nothing to develop their potential.

National radio personality Steve Harvey was so impressed with Claybrooks and his message — he interviewed him on his nationally syndicated show — that he invited him to be among a group of people from a variety of professions to speak to 100 students at the Disney Dreamers Academy in Florida recently.

Six Michigan teens were among the students chosen for the all-expense-paid

weekend of information, encouragement and entertainment at DisneyWorld.

And while Claybrooks was honored to be invited to speak, what he appreciated most was the opportunity to take his can-do message to students from across the nation. Claybrooks was especially pleased that the event introduced the students to many technical, scientific and behind-the-scenes job options.

"You could see the light bulbs going off as they learned about job opportunities they didn't even know existed," Claybrooks says.

And that's one of Claybrooks' goals: to encourage black children to vigorously pursue education so they have options.

"I'm not opposed to kids wanting to play ball," he says. "I used to want to do that myself. But for many kids it's the NBA or bust. When playing ball doesn't pan, they have no other options."

The Disney honor was the latest in a string of recognitions for Claybrooks, a partner in the Southfield-based Michigan Spine and Brain Surgeons practice. He's one of an estimated 1 percent of African-American doctors in the United States who specialize in complex spine surgery and last year, he was named one of metro Detroit's Top Docs by Hour magazine. He also was named one of the top orthopedic surgeons in the country by the Washington, D.C.-based Consumer's Research Council of America. He's also been recognized by the nationally syndicated "Tom Joyner Morning Show."

But you won't learn about those accolades from Claybrooks. He's a quiet man who keeps a lot about his life private. In fact, his mother says she learned about the Hour magazine honor when his wife, DaLisha, brought her a copy of the magazine.

"I appreciate the fact that he's so humble," says Gladys Claybrooks, who, with her husband, Odessa, both retired postal clerks, raised four sons on Detroit's northwest side. She says her son was always self-motivated.

"He never liked to lose at anything," she says. "And I never had any discipline problems out of him. I could send Roderick out in white pants and he'd come back in white pants."

His oldest brother, the Rev. Devay Myatt Sr., pastors Christ Temple Baptist Church in Detroit, where Claybrooks is an active member.

"If you didn't know who he was, you wouldn't know he was a doctor," Myatt, 45, says. "He's still somewhat quiet; not flamboyant or boastful."

"As a kid growing up, we called him the great genius. He was always tinkering with things, video games, computers. He had a knack for breaking codes."

At church, he often talks to young people about the importance of staying in school. Lakechia McCreary, 23, of Southfield, Mich., says he encouraged her to continue her education after she earned her bachelor's degree in applied health science from Bowling Green State University in Ohio in May. She's taking classes at Wayne State University to prepare for medical school.

"After I graduated, I wanted to take time off to make some money before going on to medical school," she says. "But he discouraged me from doing that. He said a lot of people take time off and never go back."

McCreary says she appreciates that Claybrooks is always available if she has questions or concerns.

"He's like a mentor to me," she says. "He makes himself available even though he has a busy schedule."

Although he now touts the gospel of getting a good education, his own route to college wasn't the well-planned path he now recommends. He didn't decide to go to all until a counselor at Benedictine High School, a since-closed Catholic school in northwest Detroit, encouraged him to apply well into his senior year.

"My counselor was shocked that I hadn't applied anywhere," he says. "She said she felt I was bright enough and challenged me to try."

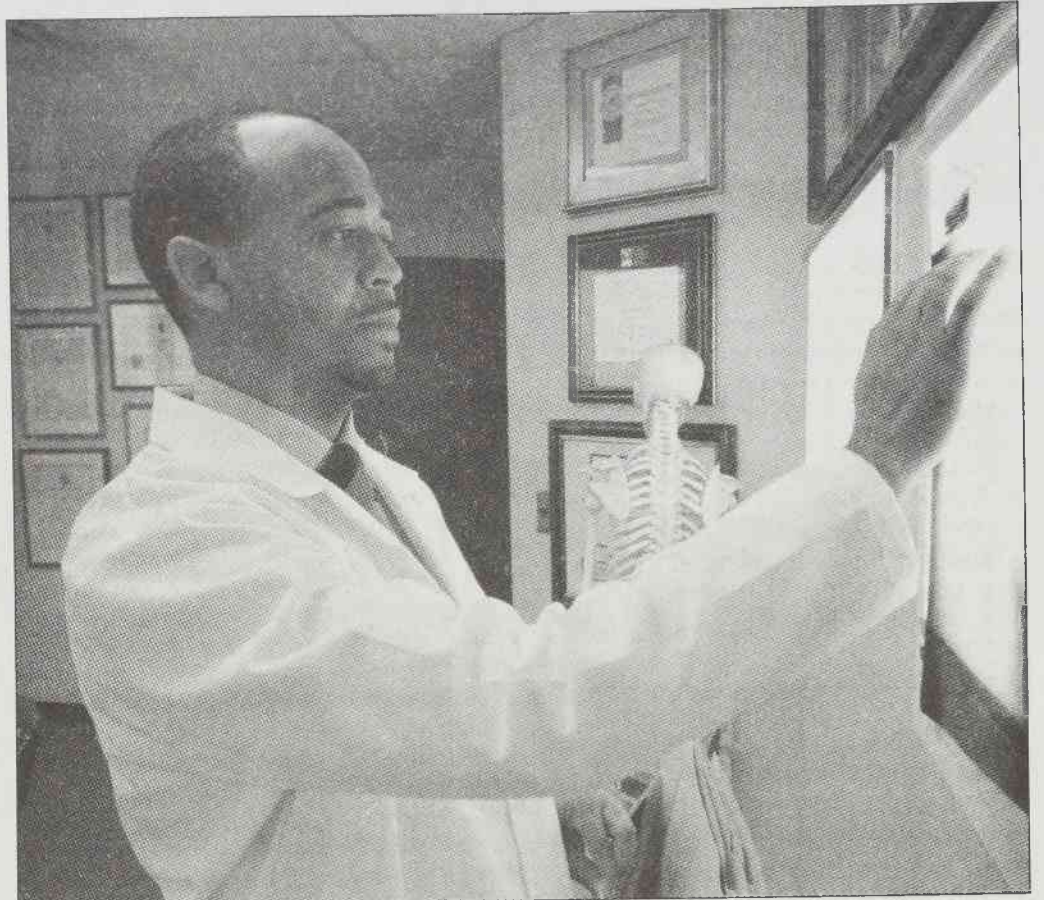


Photo courtesy of MCT Wire Service

Dr. Roderick Claybrooks, a surgeon, encourages young people to seek academic excellence. He has written a book called "The Black Student's Guide to Success."

Claybrooks says he knew he wanted to do something other than hanging out in the city as he saw many people do after high school. But he simply hadn't filled out college applications. He applied to Michigan State University because Benedictine graduates who went there and came back to visit talked about how much they liked it.

The death of his beloved grandmother, Mary Myatt, after his first year of college was a pivotal moment in his life. It was the first time anyone close to him had died. It suddenly sunk in that one day he'd have to take care of himself. He decided to become a doctor because it was a career that assured he'd be able to do that. And he'd always done well in math and science. Subjects he enjoyed most dealt with the human body.

"I never wanted to come back home a failure, because unfortunately I saw a lot of people who started and didn't finish college," he says.

He decided to become a surgeon because he likes that surgeons have a direct impact on outcomes. He was drawn to spinal surgery because he has always been fascinated with the nervous system.

"It's just interesting to me that with a thought I can tell my foot to go up and down; a thought will signal my mind to cause my hand to turn a knob," he says.

Although Michigan State

ended up providing an excellent education, he'd never tell students to select a college because other students like it. He advises students to determine what they want to do and apply to the best schools that offer that program. But MSU worked out well for him in a couple of ways. Not only did he earn his degree in medical technology, during his second year there he met the woman who became his wife six years later. "What I really love about him is his giving spirit," says Da Lisha Claybrooks, a homemaker. "He's always willing to help and offer his knowledge and expertise."

Two factors influenced his decision to write the book. As a young African-American orthopedic surgeon — too rare a combination, he says; he got more requests to speak to students than he could fulfill. Also, especially in his early years as a surgeon, he frequently worked in hospital emergency rooms. "I've met some very gifted, bright young people in emergency rooms," he says. "We are losing a lot of talent. You never know, the person who may have the cure for AIDS may be out there somewhere wasting time."

His book took five years to write. It forcefully but simply urges students to focus on achieving academic success.

"I try to get kids to understand that the only thing

stopping them is them," he says. "If you have the will, there will be a way."

He dismisses suggestions that he did well in college because he was somehow smarter than other children. "It's a belief system. Some of our young people don't excel because they don't believe they can excel. They believe they can be NBA stars because that's what they see so that's what they do. They practice outside when it's 90 degrees outside. When it's too cold to play outdoors, they play inside. And now, some of them even play basketball on a PlayStation."

"Transfer those same habits to studying. Study when it's cold, when it's hot, when it's raining," he says. "Participate and practice no matter what the season. If you have the same approach to academics that you have to athletics, you can succeed."

His passion for wanting to reach out, yet remain humble, comes from his faith.

"My faith keeps me grounded," he says. "It would be easy to simply want to attain comfort for yourself and your family. But I don't think God would be satisfied if our cupboards are full, yet others are hungry."

Most chapters of his book begin with a Biblical verse.

The first chapter begins with Hosea 4:6.

"My people are destroyed for the lack of knowledge."

Graduates in hot pursuit of health insurance

Senae Hall
BLACK COLLEGE WIRE

A recent graduate has been diagnosed with a serious eye injury and needs surgery. She no longer has college insurance since graduation and cannot pay for it out of pocket. Therefore, she cannot have the surgery.

She is not alone, as a number of recent graduates find it hard obtaining insurance after being taken care of from their parents/guardians or college while in school.

"Finding insurance after leaving Dillard is not easy. You are no longer on your parents' insurance and you can't use Dillard's (insurance) anymore," says Chantell Garrett, a 2007 graduate of Dillard University.

Upon enrolling, Dillard University students are provided insurance under Koster Insurance Agency. The price given to the school adjusts often. This year the amount was \$460. If students don't want to use this coverage, they must show proof of another type of

insurance. Therefore, every student at Dillard University is covered with some sort of insurance whether it is through the school or a different plan.

"Most students who decide to use their personal insurance are covered here in New Orleans. However, some out of state insurances are delayed when responding to a medical request, causing students to have to wait on medicine or surgeries," said Nurse Adrienne Gill, Dillard University's on campus nurse.

Students who plan to continue education through graduate school and are on their parents' insurance are likely to have a longer time frame before they have to go through the process of getting insurance on their own. However, students who are considering going from college directly in the work force have less time to search for the right coverage.

According to Thomas Anderson of Kiplinger's magazine, "Many insurance companies drop dependents from their parents' policies once they prove to have their own income.

Others limit a child's coverage to a specific age, usually 22-25.

Some insurance companies offer a student health-insurance policy. A student policy is an affordable way to fill the gap between the times the student graduates and the time they qualify for insurance with their job. However, student health plans are only available to full-time students under the age of 30. Assurant Health is the largest provider of student health plans. Any student interested in applying to Assurant Health Insurance must apply 31 days before their college graduation date. Like other insurance agencies, there are stipulations and qualifying conditions.

"I started researching for insurance the semester before graduation. It was extremely hard to find a plan that worked for me," said Alicia Davis, 2006 graduate of Dillard University.

Students who have insurance through Dillard have a three-month

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