



Mending Souls and Bones

Despite the winds of change, Dr. Regina Benjamin devotes her life to caring for—and inspiring—others.

I could drive these roads blindfolded," says Dr. Regina Benjamin, missing a pothole on the main drag of Alabama's southernmost town, Bayou La Batre (population 2,500). Bumpety-bumpetying along in her old pickup on her way to a house call—the only way she now cares for the sickest of her patients—she glances out at her empty downtown office. It was completely destroyed in September by Hurricane Georges' cruel floodwaters.

"I don't know how I'll ever rebuild," the Daphne native says quietly, turning left onto the road coursing the shrimpboat-anchored bayou. "The money just isn't there." She pauses for the down moment that follows, but her fighting spirit soon takes over. "I'm working on it," she nods. "Believe me."

Patients like Arnold Dolin are counting on that. Having been the town's only doctor for almost 10 years, Dr. Benjamin, 42 years old, understands his and others' fears. She's been with them through the

town's shrimpboat explosions, Alzheimer's diagnoses, births, deaths, and depression.

With his little blind dog at his side, Arnold pats his sofa to where he wants her to be—with him, all the way—especially through frightening chemotherapy. His eyes twinkle with joking responses throughout her serious questions but water a bit when he notices her time-to-get-going fidgets. "I don't know what I'd do without this gal," he says, reaching out for her hand and deep inside himself for a brave smile. "She's got a heart of gold, this one."

"Oh, come here, you—give me a hug," Dr. Benjamin says sweetly. "You'll be just fine."

Hugs are an important part of this internationally acclaimed doctor's practice. "That's part of her magic," says former office assistant Bobbie Smith, whose home is the second stop on Dr. Benjamin's route this day. "And she never brags on herself," she says, shaking her head. "She's so *shy*," she whispers, then raises her

voice in bemusement: "She gets an award and doesn't tell us for two weeks. We get to read about it in the paper with everyone else."

What they read about reflects an amazing career for such a young doctor. Dr. Benjamin is the first African American female ever to sit on the American Medical Association board of trustees. She's most recently the recipient of the prestigious Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation's Nelson Mandela Award for Health and Human Rights, presented to her by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. She's also a recent inductee in the Institute of Medicine's National Academy of Sciences (being only one of five Alabamians) and was invited to study in South Africa, which she did in March.

In addition, Dr. Benjamin works as the University of South Alabama's Dean of Rural Health, seeing patients at its Family Practice Center in Mobile. And in the wee hours of the morning, the

"One challenge is education—it's hard to treat a patient if he can't read his prescription. Another is convincing older people on fixed incomes to buy medicine and not just food. And you just can't make people pay what they don't have."

Dr. Regina Benjamin

single doctor works at her Spanish Fort home, writing a \$6-million grant renewal proposal to support Area Health Education Centers—which, she notes, may help places like Bayou La Batre.

Somehow, she finds time to be an active member of just about every organization committed to medicine and young leaders. "I've always liked being a part of any group where I could make a difference," she says. "Growing up, I never saw a black doctor; it wasn't even in my realm of thinking that I could even be one. Now that's changing. But it's still important for me to be a mentor to others."

Since studying medicine at Xavier University and Morehouse School of Medicine—learning from the likes of fellow Alabamian and current U.S. Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher—she's dedicated her life to helping people in under-served communities get the best health care available. "I've got a lot more to do," she says, brushing aside her acclaim.

She climbs back in her truck for the 30-mile ride home. "I just love my work. It's who I am. There've been so many times I've felt like giving up—when people told me I couldn't go to medical school; when my mother and brother died at nearly the same time; when my office was destroyed. But God has shown me I've got to keep going," she says.

"I don't know how this happens, but I get a feeling—almost a psychic connection to people. If you listen and pay close attention, you really can tune in to others' needs. All of us can—and we can make a difference." *Denise Gee*



"I'm grateful that she's always here for me," says Arnold Dolin, with Dr. Regina Benjamin.