Where have all the heroes gone?

William M. Silverman, DO

Several years ago I, as an osteopathic physician, had the privilege to serve my profession for the first time as a representative from Florida to the House of Delegates of the American Osteopathic Association. Jennifer, my 17-year-old daughter who was evaluating her college choices, accompanied me. The meeting, held in Atlanta, was inspiring. I experienced and learned firsthand the intrigue of medical politics. I observed how the philosophy, positions, and directions of my profession change. However, my most memorable moment was when I met a personal heroine.

Inaugurated during the meeting as President of the American Osteopathic Association was William Anderson, DO. Dr. Anderson, a surgeon from Michigan, was the first African-American elected president of the AOA. He is a dynamic individual whose life has been both full and interesting. A caring professional, it was clear that he had earned his new position through hard work, loyalty, and service. There was a reception scheduled for Saturday evening in Dr. Anderson’s honor. Jennifer and I, before heading out to explore the city, decided to pay our respects. We went to the reception.

Slowly we trudged through the receiving line. This line, after entering the ballroom, turned sharply to the left into an alcove. Dr. Anderson’s children, all professionals, headed the line. Proudly, they greeted us enthusiastically. Peering down the receiving line I spotted a frail woman sitting in a wheelchair next to Dr. Anderson. As we moved up to him we shook hands. He then took Jennifer’s and said, “Bill, Jennifer, I want to introduce you to someone special.” He turned toward the wheelchair. As I thought I was going to be introduced to Dr. Anderson’s mother, I bent to place a peck of a kiss on her cheek and congratulate her on her son’s success.

Just as I was about to place this kiss Dr. Anderson said, “Dr. Silverman, Jennifer, may I present Rosa Parks.”

Tears came to my eyes, and for once in my life I was speechless. Jennifer, also in awe, reacted with the statement, “My God, I thought you were dead.”

Rosa’s first words to us were, “No child, I am still alive.” Unfortunately, even as I regained my composure, I was unable to express to Mrs. Parks what her actions had meant to me. The line moved on and by the time it finished Mrs. Parks had already gone back to her room.

Growing up I had come to believe that there are individuals who by single acts of conviction or courage alter history and change the course of mankind. These people had become my heroes. Rosa Parks was one of those individuals who had her moment, changed history, and quietly moved on with her life.

Instead of going out to dinner, we feasted on hors d’oeuvres and after socializing we returned to our room. Eagerly, I called home to let the rest of my family know about our experience. My son Steven, age 10, answered the phone. I first said hello then asked Steven to guess who we had met. His response was “Where are you.” I answered, “Atlanta.”

Excited, Steven’s response was “Dominique Wilkins?” I answered “no.” Impatiently, and with a child’s disinterest, he asked politely, “So whom did you meet?” My two-word response was “Rosa Parks.”

Steven exclaimed with excitement and renewed interest, “The bus lady! Tell me about her.” I was proud that he knew who she was and shared our enthusiasm.

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The next day, we returned home to Central Florida and on Monday I went to work. During the course of the day and the rest of the week, I related my experience to almost anyone who would listen: physicians, nurses, staff, patients, etc. Clearly I was still excited, but as the week passed, I became distraught. A substantial number of those I told had no idea who Rosa Parks was and then didn’t even care about what she did. The ignorance and apathy crossed all racial lines, gender, and ethnic boundaries. This attitude was perhaps the most prevalent in the young, of black, white, Hispanic and Asian race and origin. The youth generally even had no knowledge of the series of events she started.

They knew and worshipped Shaquille O’Neal, Larry Bird, Oral Hersheiser, and Michael Jordan. They knew Whoopi Goldberg, Bruce Willis, Eddie Murphy, and Sharon

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Stone. They knew rappers, Madonna, Michael Bolton, Queen. They did not know Albert Einstein, Jackie Robinson, Satchel Paige, George Washington Carver, Omar Bradley, and Mickey Marcus. Something is wrong!

Where have all the real heroes gone? Minstrels in the Middle Ages would sing of knights slaying dragons. Greek actors portrayed the heroes of the Odyssey on stage. Folklore spread the legends of Pecos Bill, Paul Bunyan, Johnny Appleseed, and John Henry. Schools should be telling tales of great Americans, world leaders, and events. Perhaps the volume of history is too great to spend more than five minutes on someone who refused to give up her seat on a bus. We, the parents of today's youth, don't even try to fill the gap. We, like our children, listen to the radio, watch television, surf the net, go to ballgames and react in horror to the news' description of our leaders' behavior.

I wrote this article several years ago. I never had a way to end it. I do now.

Where are the heroes of today? They are among us and simply do not know who they are. For real heroes emerge when they are needed. Some will live and some will die. Some are in a field in Pennsylvania; others are in lower Manhattan and at the Pentagon. Others walk among us knowing painfully what they experienced and lost. Some may just want to forget.

Who is a hero? Perhaps the next one will be you.