

# Helene D. Gayle, MD, MPH

RECIPIENT OF THE 2012 JIMMY AND ROSALYNN CARTER HUMANITARIAN AWARD

Physician, researcher, executive and global caregiver Dr. Helene D. Gayle is the 2012 recipient of the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Award Humanitarian Award.

“I have often said that Helene Gayle is perhaps the most trusted global public health leader and rightly so,” says Dr. David Satcher, 16th Surgeon General of the United States, Director of the Satcher Health Leadership Institute at the Morehouse School of Medicine, and the 1999 Carter Award honoree. “She has a unique ability to understand and identify with diverse cultures throughout the world and to join them in moving to improve the health of communities.”

All of this Dr. Gayle accomplishes “with the spirit of servanthood,” Dr. Satcher says. “She does not take herself too seriously and is a joy to be around and work with.”

Born and raised in Buffalo, New York, Gayle describes her childhood in one word: “Cold!”

She adds: “Have you ever been to Buffalo in the winter? If so, you know what I’m talking about, if not I don’t suggest it.”

Her father owned a small business and her mother was a social worker. “They both taught me and my siblings the importance of giving back to the community,” Dr. Gayle says. “My four siblings and I spent most Sundays after church visiting the sick and incapacitated. My parents instilled in me the belief that a person’s most noble calling was to create positive social change.”

When she was 12 years old, she wrote in a 2008 *Newsweek* story, “I was hit by a car as I was crossing the street on my bicycle. I was hospitalized for three months and then in

traction at home for another three months. I had to learn to rely on my own resources perhaps more than you normally do when you’re that young.”

From an early age, Dr. Gayle says, “I knew I wanted to somehow serve others and work on issues of social justice. My teen years came at a time in the world when many in the US were very engaged in thinking about social concerns, from civil rights and anti-apartheid to the women’s movement. That is really what led me to medicine; it was a great way for me to continue to give back to the community.”

Helene Gayle graduated from Barnard College in 1976 with a degree in psychology. When she heard Dr. D. A. Henderson speak about his efforts to eradicate smallpox, she was inspired. “He verified what I thought I wanted to do,” Dr. Gayle says. “His speech made me realize: Wow! You can eradicate diseases off the face of the earth. You can do something that makes a difference—not just as a physician, by treating one person at a time, but thinking about how you can make a difference in whole popula-



tions. That was a true defining moment.”

She earned her degree in medicine from the University of Pennsylvania and a master’s degree in public health from Johns Hopkins University.

After a residency in pediatric medicine at the Children’s Hospital National Medical Center in Washington, DC, Dr. Gayle served in the Epidemic Intelligence Service at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)—a valuable training ground for combatants against infectious diseases. Upon completion of another residency, this one in preventive medicine, she joined the CDC staff as an epidemiologist. She delved into the problems of malnourished children in the United States and around the world, and she evaluated and implemented child survival programs in Africa. She also conducted research and worked on programs and policy in the field of HIV/AIDS.

One of her earliest assignments at CDC, she recalled in *Newsweek*, was conducting nutrition assessments in drought-affected areas in West Africa that were at risk for food shortage and famine. “Everywhere I went, people pooled together their best meals to make sure that I, as a visitor who was coming to help them, was treated with the greatest amount of kindness, even if they weren’t going to be able to get a meal themselves,” she wrote. “That generosity of spirit cemented my commitment to finding ways to work internationally. I then went on to do much of the rest of my career at CDC in HIV, both domestically and internationally.”

In 1992, Helene Gayle became AIDS coordinator and chief of the HIV/AIDS division for the U.S Agency for International Development. In 1995, she was named Director for the National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention at CDC. She became the director of CDC’s Washington office and a health consultant to various international agencies, including the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the World Bank and UNAIDS.

In 2001, she was appointed director of the HIV, TB and reproductive health program for the Bill and Melinda Gates



Foundation. There, she was responsible for research, programs and policies concerning HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, reproductive health issues and tuberculosis.

It was during Dr. Gayle’s tenure at the Gates Foundation, she says, when “I was contacted about moving to CARE. I saw the move as an opportunity to come full circle and to address social and economic factors that fuel health inequities and keep people trapped in poverty. Until I arrived at the CARE offices, I never truly realized the scope of CARE’s global operations. For instance, in 2010 CARE reached more than 82 million people and supported 905 poverty-fighting projects in 87 countries. And none of this could be done without the continued dedication of our 11,000 employees worldwide.”

In *Newsweek*, Dr. Gayle observed that her career “has been one of going from the individual to the societal to the mega societal.” At CARE, “we work on everything from health, education, water and microfinance to emergencies and conflicts, agriculture and climate change—the whole bucket of things that affect people living in extreme poverty.”

For more than 60 years, says Ann Lurie, President of the Ann and Robert H. Lurie Foundation, and the 2010 Carter



Humanitarian Award honoree, the name “CARE” has evoked positive social change. “Once known primarily for aid packages and disaster assistance,” Ms. Lurie says, “under Dr. Gayle’s vibrant leadership, the mission of the international organization has been enhanced, reshaped and redefined. With robust programs in more than 60 countries, CARE now focuses more of its work on fighting world poverty by improving the lives of women and girls—because Dr. Gayle believes they hold the key to long-lasting social change in communities.”

Dozens of CARE programs, operating at the grass-roots level, provide education opportunities and foster economic accountability and independence, Ann Lurie says. CARE has successfully organized more than 1.6 million members into 75,000 Village Savings and Loan groups, located in over 20 sub-Saharan African countries and from Afghanistan to Sri Lanka. Most of the members are women who through weekly financial contributions make seed money available to others who are starting their own businesses. Between 1991 and 2008, these village-level organizations lent almost \$100 million at an average of \$25 per loan.

In addition to overseeing the vast and varied operations of CARE, Dr. Gayle chairs the Obama Administration’s Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS and is a member of the President’s Commission on White House Fellowships.

She has appeared on the list of *Foreign Policy* magazine’s “Top 100 Global Thinkers,” *Newsweek* magazine’s top 10 “Women in Leadership” and the *Wall Street Journal*’s list of “50 Women to Watch.” She was also named as one of the “100 Most Influential Georgians” and the “100 Most Influential Atlantans.”

Though her work schedule keeps her busy, Gayle says, “I enjoy spending my time off exercising, cooking, and entertaining friends and family. Every summer, I vacation with my siblings to attend the Chautauqua Institution in upstate New York, a tradition that began when we were young.”

Asked what continues to drive her, Helene Gayle says: “I look up to people who stand up for their convictions, such as Nelson Mandela and Jimmy Carter. For me, the people who are inspirational are people who have vision for making a difference in the world and then really go out and make those changes.”

Through her work at CARE, Gayle says, “I’m fortunate to be able to travel around the world and have met some truly incredible people who have tremendous hope and resilience in some of the bleakest and more desperate conditions imaginable. I draw my inspiration from many of these people—their strength and perseverance to create a better life for themselves and their family inspires me, because they deserve nothing less.”

“When I met Dr. Gayle,” says Ann Lurie, “I was impressed by her passion for the disenfranchised and her fierce insistence that women and girls must be the recipients of all messages geared to changing access to medical care and the socioeconomic structure of families. In fact, her entire distinguished career is testimony to her continual commitment to improving the health and well-being of all mankind by designing and instituting intelligent, innovative and relevant programs that are proven change agents for a broad range of social issues. I am inspired by her indomitable spirit and accomplishments and consider her an exceptionally notable citizen, leader and humanitarian.”