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Physician Spotlight

Robert L. Harris, MD

*Founder/Director, Southeast Urogynecology; Co-founder/
Co-Managing Partner, Women's Specialty Center*

By LYNNE JETER

JACKSON—When Bob Harris was in the eighth grade at Mooreville, a small public school in North Mississippi, his science teacher asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. Without skipping a beat, he said: “A Beverly Hills gynecologist.”

Because he grew up on a dairy farm in Lee County, and learned to drive a tractor before an automobile, and both parents were hard-working, salt-of-the-earth people, the answer seemed a little unusual. “Are you sure?” the teacher asked. “Absolutely,” he replied, with a smile.

“I interviewed in Southern California after completing my residency, so I almost did just that,” said Harris. After attending Itawamba Community College and graduating magna cum laude with a biological sciences degree at Mississippi State University, completing medical school at the University of Mississippi and an internship/residency in OB/GYN at the University of Mississippi Medical Center, Harris skipped the California route in pursuit of a fellowship in Urogynecology and Reconstructive Pelvic Surgery at Duke University Medical Center. “Getting accepted to Duke was the best thing that ever happened to me from a professional standpoint.”

Harris focused on returning to Mississippi to practice medicine.

“I wanted to offer a much-needed subspecialty that wasn’t available at that time. I really wanted to help women with these special problems,” said Harris, who turned down an offer to join Duke’s faculty and relocated to Jackson, where he joined the faculty at UMC and later established Southeast Urogynecology at Women’s Specialty Center.

The youngest of three—siblings Gail and Glen are four and six years older, respectively—born to Bud and Sara, Harris was surrounded by mentors early on. He learned the importance of commitment from his parents, “the most in-love couple I’ve ever seen;” the value of discipline from Rex Berryman, his high school baseball coach who

was also the winningest coach in Mississippi history; and the social aspects of life—how to act, what to say, what to wear—from Jimmy Long, owner of MLM Clothiers in Tupelo.

“Mr. Long hired me as a clerk and I got to know all the respected physicians, bankers, and businessmen in town. I shined their shoes while I asked them lots of questions,” said Harris, who also moonlighted as a bartender at private parties in these same men’s homes. “I thought to myself, if this is the good life, I think I might want it! I felt like I was smart enough and certainly had the drive and dedication to do whatever I wanted, really.”

Harris pursued leadership roles, and learned “to be quiet and listen and learn,” admittedly a tough thing to do, he said, “... and to be gregarious when appropriate.”

In college, he played varsity baseball, was voted Freshman Favorite, won the Phi Theta Kappa Biology, Chemistry, and Physics Awards, and served Alpha Epsilon Delta as treasurer. In medical school, he was social chairman, student body council president, senior class president, and representative on the Liaison Committee on Medical Education. He also produced award-winning research and presidential papers during his residency and fellowship training.

Harris began a busy practice life, juggling caseloads with professional society work and other pursuits.

After reading Michael E. Gerber’s *The E-Myth* in 2000, Harris made a pivotal change. “I was working super hard ... the classic doctor’s story,” he said. “You have patients coming through, and work all the time, and one day you realize your wife is getting sick of your attitude and things aren’t quite right.”

Harris knew intuitively that a great attitude was the key to getting ahead in life. “We can’t control our looks, who our family is, what we were born with,” he explained, “but the one thing that we all can control fully, that is totally our choice, is attitude.”

At first, Harris quit wasting time, which he admitted wasn’t easy to do.

“A byproduct of being so incredibly busy as a physician is that when we have an hour,

we just blow it,” he said. “We’re so happy to have a break that we do nothing. I promised myself I’d take a deep breath, and spend more time alone in my office. I closed the door and did a lot of research on my computer and a lot of reading. Like Gerber advises in *E-Myth Physician*, I started working *on* my practice instead of working *in* it all the time.”

Harris devoured John Maxwell leadership books, and biographies of successful people, from Abraham Lincoln to Robert E. Lee to Vince Lombardi.

“I realized you didn’t have to work *all the time*,” he said. “And when I worked, I wanted it to be meaningful ... to make things better for doctors and patients, whether by product or process.”

Then Harris took a bolder move. He dropped patient care work to four days a week instead of five, thanks in part to his partner, Steven Speights, MD, “the hardest-working man and greatest friend I could ever imagine.”

“I devoted that extra day to business and personal development,” he said. “I worked on generating ideas that would add value. It’s classic John Maxwell. Adding value to others in any and every way will come back to you exponentially.”

One of his initial concepts emerged as Bladder Health Network (BHN), a service providing continence lab testing in the offices of busy OB/GYN practices.

“I rolled up my business plans and went on the road, giving presentations myself,” he recalled. “Two clinics in Flowood were the first to sign up. I knew there was potential, but I also knew I couldn’t continue doing everything myself.” Then he met John Spivey, a successful entrepreneur specializing in high-tech ventures, in a meeting Harris calls “serendipitous.”

“I was intrigued with his financial modeling for an investment opportunity he was pitching, and I knew that’s what I needed,” said Harris. “I shared my business idea with



John, and he was so excited, he asked me to let him run with it without pay. He only wanted a percentage.”

BHN now contracts with roughly 140 clinics in 26 states.

“Wheels are turning in my head and my heart all the time about how to come up with solutions that add value in some way,” he said.

Harris has also stepped up “paying it forward” in many ways. Some gestures are as simple as passing along books that he believes will help someone advance along their own path.

“That’s part of mentoring,” he explained. “Sometimes, all another person needs is some thoughtfulness for a second. I get so many surprise responses when I give someone a book or send them a hand-written note.” (Al Addison, MD, a famous gynecological surgeon at Duke who Harris describes as a second father, taught him that.) “I get it. I mean, here I am a farm boy from outside of Tupelo. I had some help. I truly believe that the more we give, the more we receive.”

Harris has served on multiple committees in national organizations, but recently has become more selective about the roles he plays in state and national leadership roles, and the consulting jobs he takes. Board-certified, he is licensed to practice medicine in eight southern states, including the Carolinas.

“It’s never been about finances or early retirement,” said Harris, who has two children, Connor, 14, and Madelyn, 12, with his wife of 17 years, Myriam. “However, I do think that a byproduct of generating and implementing good ideas is that you generally do well.”

Harris defines success with a “Joe-Pa” quote.

“When a reporter asked Joe Paterno before the season if his team would be successful, he responded, paraphrasing, ‘We strive for excellence only; you can decide if we are successful.’ Not a bad answer.”