Dr. Charles Boyette, Man of Many Hats

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Alex Garretson and Tammy Nixon with Dr. Charles Boyette

Introduction

Eastern Beaufort County has a real scarcity of physicians and yet provides needed health care services to approximately 10,000 people. Dr. Charles Otis Boyette is at the hub of these services. He maintains his own family practice, is Chief
of Staff of Pungo District Hospital Corp., and the mayor of Belhaven.

On September 28, 1988, we talked to Dr. Boyette in his office in Belhaven. We learned he "wore many hats" as he told us of his activities as a physician, mayor, farmer, wildlife enthusiast, and more. Dr. Boyette is married to the former Alleyne Garton and is the father of four children.

As he explained his own accomplishments and those of the municipality he serves, we found that this unusual man touches the lives of thousands in a very positive way. He epitomizes giving more to than taking from community, country, humanity, and life.

Life: Dr. Boyette, you were born and raised in Eastern North Carolina?

Dr. Boyette: That's correct. I was born in Chadbourne, North Carolina, a town of approximately 2,200 very much like Belhaven except located a little further inland down in Columbus County.

Life: How did you get interested in medicine?

Dr. Boyette: As I recall in that small town of Chadbourne, there was always a deficiency of health care and medical care. And being exposed to a large number of people in our old general store there, I was always mindful of the needs in the health care areas of people in that particular area. I remember one old man coming in with a handkerchief around his head. He had a severe headache, and obviously, hypertension. His veins were all distended. I knew of many employees who worked with us who needed assistance in health but medically couldn't get it. In addition to that, I had a father who was ill for many years and required a considerable amount of health care. I suspected that those factors combined, plus a basic interest in dealing with the public, would be the main interests that I had in going into medicine.

Life: You went to Chapel Hill to medical school?

Dr. Boyette: Yes, I went to the University of North Carolina undergraduate school for four years where I majored in history and also took pre-med at the same time. I was a Morehead Scholar finalist, got a university scholarship, and worked in the dining hall there. I went out for football as a walk-on and made the team. I got additional help with my meals and also participated on the wrestling team and received a very small wrestling scholarship. Following the completion of those four years, I simply transferred to another part of the campus and went to medical school for four additional years, graduating in 1961.

Life: How did you come to practice here in Belhaven?

Dr. Boyette: After completion of medical school, I did an internship with the United States Navy, having already done two externships or summer programs with the Navy. After the completion of the internship, I went into the flight surgery program. I completed the School of Aviation Medicine down in Pensacola, Florida. Then, I applied for a billet at the Marine Corps Air Station, New River, Jacksonville, North Carolina. I served there from 1962-1964 with the Marines as a designated Naval Aviator flight surgeon. While in that particular duty station, I looked around Eastern North Carolina for a location. I knew that after I completed my military obligation, I would be doing family medicine in Eastern North Carolina. Belhaven, I knew about through a friend of my wife whose mother kept in contact with us. That was Mrs. Glade Linton; she has, since I came to Belhaven and until this present time 25 years later, remained one of my faithful patients. After visiting Belhaven on two occasions, I
knew that there was a great deficiency here at that time, a need for another physician. There was only one physician, a small 24-bed hospital, and thousands of people who were in need of additional health care. So the size of the community was exactly the type of community I wanted to come into, and the opportunity just fell into being.

Life: Last time we talked to you, you mentioned your strong support of family practice as opposed to specialization. Could you tell us why you feel strongly about that?

Dr. Boyette: I've always been interested in primary care, and primary care encompasses those health care professions, which deal with basically the family as a whole. In family medicine today we're able to take care of over 90% of all the health care needs of an entire family. That would include anything from birth to death and includes obstetrics. I feel very strongly that this is where the need is greatest and this is where the rewards are the greatest as far as I care to practice.

I think that the emphasis during the past years has been on specialization, but that trend certainly in the past eight to ten years has been undergoing some changes. Because there is a revival of the specialty of family medicine or family practice, more doctors and students are interested in going into this particular type of primary care. Again, the opportunities are just unlimited at this particular time.

In fact, family medicine has one of the greatest demands for placement of doctors of all specialties in the U.S. today. We can't train enough family physicians to fill the needs that we have in primary care. And I have no reservations about having gone into family medicine and feel very comfortable in saying that is the type of specialty that one would need if they're going to practice medicine in a rural or medically underserved area where there is very little back-up. The doctor must be well trained and in a comprehensive fashion. As I look at the practice of medicine today, our needs are greatest in primary care, in medically underserved areas; and that holds true in North Carolina and every other state in the union as well.

Life: Doctors don't make house calls as often today as they used to, do they?

Dr. Boyette: It doesn't happen as much, but some of us still make house calls. In fact, in Belhaven I've made house calls for 25 years. I don't make as many house calls now as I did when I started. In fact, when I came to Belhaven in July of 1964, I would work parttime on the weekend when I had a few days off for Dr. J. T. Wright, and on the way into town I would stop and make a few house calls. On the way out of town Sunday night, I would stop by and see two or three others who were really not able or found it inconvenient to come to the doctor's office. Upon coming to Belhaven, I saw many people on house visits over a period of years, but as the practice grew and the demands in the office and in the hospital became greater, there was no time really left to make a house call unless it was a dire emergency. In fact, today I still occasionally make house calls, one or two a week, sometimes more, and frequently do so on my bicycle. So that is a little bit of a twist to a house call.

Life: You are the mayor here also. How did you get interested in civic affairs?

Dr. Boyette: In growing up I participated in just about every aspect of school life there was: BETA Club, athletic events—I participated on three ball teams (football, baseball, and basketball)—and was also involved in working after school in our old country store where I was exposed to a large number of people. I delivered two newspapers for about five years. And with all of this “people” exposure and knowing what was going on in the church, the community, and on the farm and
having an avid interest in people and the public, I naturally had an interest in becoming involved in the Belhaven community.

I feel that professionals should not limit themselves solely to their professional life. They should expand out and share their experiences and knowledge with people in the community through other aspects: whether it be as participation on a school committee or in their church, Chamber of Commerce or other civic organizations within the community. I feel that professional people come to learn the people they treat and are associated with them better if they see them in different walks of life and different places other than just in the doctor’s office.

We were talking about how I got involved in all these community positions and events. So upon arrival in Belhaven, I became involved first of all in the schools, the churches, the Chamber of Commerce, and became the chairman of the school board, president of Belhaven Community Chamber of Commerce, and then very quickly became involved in city business. Within the third year here, I ran for the council and was elected. Since that time I have served on the council or in the position of mayor until the present time. I chose not to run one term of two years, and I lost one election for mayor. I was out of the political field for one term back in 1978-80; then I returned and have been serving as mayor since that time.

Also I have other positions and areas of interest in the community. One would be as a member of Trinity United Methodist Church where I serve as Chairman of Board of Trustees. I constantly brag about our church having such high standards that one has to have a doctor’s degree in order to be the yardman for the church. I enjoy participating in maintenance of the grounds of the church; landscaping and beautification are other interests that I have in the community.

I have participated in many beautification and improvement projects in Belhaven over the years.

Life: You are very optimistic about the future of Belhaven. Could you tell us a little bit about what you see down the road for the town?

Dr. Boyette: Over the years I think Belhaven has made great progress. As you know, Belhaven began in the 1880’s as Jack’s Neck as a lumbering town, and then the name was changed in 1893 to Belpoint and then to Belhaven finally. It was incorporated in 1899, and the city hall was built in 1912. During the early 1930’s Belhaven had a population in excess of 3,000 whereas the population today is 2,512. Well, it wasn’t long that all of the good timber was cut down, and the huge lumber mills which were in Belhaven providing jobs for all of the hundreds and thousands of people began to dwindle. The fishing industry was here then and still remains today.

Well, during the ’40’s and early ’50’s Belhaven lost population. There was a tremendous “out” migration, and it just became stagnant. There were no new businesses, no new jobs, and it was only in the 1960’s the town began to reinvigorate and began to pay some attention to what our needs were and what we wanted to do. One of the biggest projects we had in the ’60’s was that of a million-dollar water and sewer renovation project. I thought that was a pretty big project, and it certainly was because we’re still paying for it today. Thank goodness we did it then because it would have been even higher and almost impossible to get at any later date. I thought that was a step in the right direction, and then there was emphasis on our hospital and on our health care delivery here and on our seafood processing. And those two industries, seafood processing being number one, contribute a 30-million-dollar income to this area and hundreds of jobs. And the health care industry, with 85 employees at the Pungo District Hospital serving as a hub for health care delivery in
the entire Pungo Basin area consisting of eastern Beaufort and Hyde Counties, has been stalwart and is the second largest contributor to the local economy, particularly when you combine three doctors’ offices and three pharmacies and two dental offices along with that hospital complex.

Now, it was only in the 1970’s—late 70’s—that we began to get interested in housing improvements in Belhaven. Over the past 10 years there has been two and a half million dollars of housing improvements in Belhaven. Senior Citizens, Pungo Court, revitalization projects in Northside Community, all total, amount to that sum. Additionally in the last two years we have had approximately eight million dollars worth of new business move into Belhaven, and the majority of this has been on the bypass where we have a new Chevrolet business, we have a marina, we have Hardee’s, and we have a drugstore and general store complex. We have Coastal Satellite/Radio Shack. All of these businesses have made a significant contribution. Downtown, one of the biggest things that has happened is the building of an almost million-dollar Wachovia Bank building. Additional improvements have been the renovation and occupation of the old Wachovia Bank building by the city government as a municipal building. There have been substantial improvements on the city hall—the steeple repair and internal renovations and total roofing job. We have a new Welcome Center/Chamber of Commerce office which has been developed during the last two and a half to three years. The entire downtown area has been totally repaved.

We have active in Belhaven a community house, a civic center, a library which is undergoing improvements now and has been reorganized during the past three or four years. We have a museum with an active board of directors, which is just a wonderful thing to bring people to our community. We have stability in our municipal government with a group of dedicated council members who have served many years now, and who are accustomed to working and getting things done.

When we look at all of these intangible benefits, we know that we are able to look to the future with plans to clean up the waterfront. We have already just completed, through the Army Corps of Engineers, the breakwater repairs, which amounted to almost a million dollars. The waterfront cleanup will be about $94,000, of which the community will have to fund about $30,000. But this will improve the aesthetics and the appearance and safety of our waterfront. So the waterfront improvements, the breakwater, the Welcome Center/Chamber of Commerce office and still tied in with this we have two and a fourth million dollars worth of business still in a shopping center to be located on 264 bypass during this next forthcoming year.

Tie that into a one-point-three-million-dollar sewer system improvement called the 201 Facilities Improvements Plan. That will be a total renovation of our entire waste water treatment in Belhaven with new pumping stations, new analyzers and degassers. And we’ll have sludge beds and all of the things to make Belhaven able to support growth, should growth come to this community. At this time we have a moratorium on new hookups for new industries and large users because our sewage system is marginal in its operational capacity. But this one-point-three-million-dollar endeavor will allow us that necessary room for expansion, and I do believe that industry will come and business will come.

Right now there is an ever increasing number of people settling in Belhaven who are retiring, looking for a place on the creeks and the waterways. We have beautiful locations on the Pungo River, Pantego Creek, Pungo Creek, and the many smaller tributaries around this area. So tourism and retirement are the major focal points for enhancement of our community from the commercial standpoint at this time.
We are looking to improve our downtown with further revitalization. Unfortunately we had two fires in the past two and a half years, which wiped out two million dollars worth of investments and businesses in the downtown area. That is a substantial loss to any community at any time, and I think that those fire losses have been the most devastating things that have happened to this community and thwarted our efforts to make both the downtown area and the bypass area totally successful in creating good shopping areas for our citizens and also those that would be coming to Belhaven.

*Life:* I've heard the sentiment other places that tourism is really where the emphasis ought to be. It seems to be nonpolluting and produces good jobs. Do you agree?

*Dr. Boyette:* Yes. Tourism is North Carolina's second largest industry but really has not developed in the East. I see it here and at Bath. It's a golden opportunity. Opportunity abounds right here. North Carolina is taking advantage more and more of this. The state agency on travel and tourism is extremely busy at this particular time. There are many areas in the western part of the state in the mountains that are trying to go the same way we are in Eastern North Carolina, but Belhaven, again, is located uniquely to take advantage of all of that. We are also suited admirably to receive small industry because we have a large group of people who are employable and trainable in various types of industry, and we need more jobs. We need more jobs and can use all the visitors that come our way, and I do agree 100 percent that tourism can be a bonanza for us. There is no question about it.

*Life:* Could you tell us about some of your interests and hobbies, like your fire engine?

*Dr. Boyette:* I have a number of interesting hobbies and have some time still left out of busy days to participate in these hobbies and interests, though it is frequently a matter of minutes rather than hours or a day. I have a fire engine, an old 1935 Chevrolet chassis, representing the first fire truck that Belhaven purchased. When I came to Belhaven, this truck was parked in an empty field, and I ended up buying that fire truck in a dilapidated state of repair for $700. The owner bought it as surplus from the town about two and a half years prior to that for $50. However, after a fix up and a painting job, that fire truck is still running in Christmas parades, 4th of July celebration events, and any other special event in Belhaven. Particularly when we have visitors coming to town, I will pull out the fire engine and take them on a tour through town or get in parades and throw candy to the youngsters. I find it a very satisfying thing to do. I enjoy being along the parade route and spotting literally hundreds of people that I know—children that I treat and have delivered and some that I have just put a cast on their arm and there they are catching candy in one hand. All of these things contribute, again, to the pleasures of being in a small community. You could not do this everywhere in the world you live.

Additionally, I participate and have been for years, in water sports, swimming and skiing, pick-up basketball with the children and friends, gardening with two orchards, one in town and one at the cottage, and with a vegetable garden in town. I have two hot houses with about 300 or 400 plants. I don't really know how many I do have and find it very satisfying to be able to propagate and to successfully beautify the area. I also use these plants that I grow extensively throughout the town at the receptions at the civic center, displaying plants at the municipal building, city hall, and my own office, and I frequently loan the plants to the school, churches, and weddings for their use. It's good to be able to have and to be able to share them. Occasionally, these plants might be abused, but this is a rarity. People take very good care of them and return them and allow me to again enjoy them and yet lend them out.
Additionally, I have an interest in remodeling and updating old houses and derelicts that people don’t take care of or have allowed to deteriorate or can’t see the need to repair themselves or perhaps they don’t have the finances or for other reasons, that these buildings and grounds have gone downhill. Over the years I’ve taken a number of old lots and buildings and renovated them and turned them into decent rentals to improve the housing market in Belhaven.

Beyond that I would say that one of my avid pastimes is in wildlife, and I long ago ceased hunting and have come to grow and turn loose birds and wildlife into the wild. I have a game bird farm with about 1,200 birds. We have guineas, chickens, bantam ducks of several varieties. I have a system whereby we have automatic feeders and watering, and at least two different people on a part-time basis will go by and help take care of those. We raise our own corn on a small farm adjacent to this cottage area and use it to feed the birds. We frequently have as many as 1,500 Canada geese, maybe one to two thousand ducks in at the wintertime landing on these three or four ponds in that area. I also, in addition to having a license to hold wildlife, both federal and state, have a rehabilitation permit from the state and federal government whereby I “attend” injured birds and try to nurse them back to health or whatever we can do after they’ve been wounded or struck by vehicles or shocked on light wires or even become sick from infectious diseases or whatever. That again is an unusual and unique approach to the rehabilitation of wildlife and involvement in the game bird farm. It provides another outlet and also another area of interest.

*Life:* You mentioned that you stopped hunting.

*Dr. Boyette:* I find a great deal more pleasure in walking out over a field rather than going out into the field and seeing what you can entrap and shoot and kill. I don’t have anything against hunting per se. I do think people who hunt should be required to eat what they shoot. Beyond that there is too much hunting going on at this particular time, and one of the real concerns I have is the fact these bullets frequently end up in people rather than in the game. I have attended a number of people either injured or killed in hunting accidents in this area over the past 25 years.

*Life:* I was talking to a fellow who hunts, but he has these same concerns that you do. He said that he thought that one thing that would be good would be to allow only shot guns, that rifles just go too far.

*Dr. Boyette:* Rifles go too far and have really caused a tremendous amount of damage in people’s health and lives. So many of these wooded areas have been cleared over the past 30 to 50 years. You just have tremendous open fields and spaces, and people from elsewhere come in and stop on the road and start hunting. They don’t check to see who owns the field, they don’t check to see who else is there, they don’t pay too much attention to signs and come loaded as if they were going to war in Iran. They are loaded with tremendous firepower and might get a little fawn or might get this or that or the other.

I really believe we’re overhunting, and also in this present day and time we don’t need to keep cutting all the timberland that’s there. We’re doing something wrong with the environment. We’re doing something wrong with the wildlife, and we’re doing something wrong with the waters. Everywhere you look I believe there’s an element of self-destruction in the things we need to protect for our children’s future.

*Life:* What advice would you give these young *Life on the Pamlico* students for their lives?
Dr. Boyette: I would give the same advice for any young student: work hard and make the most of it. Try to set your goals and reach up to these goals. Try to do your very best as you go along. Don’t put off till tomorrow what can be accomplished today. When you shoot for a project or shoot for success, don’t give up. If you fail the first time, try again, but don’t be just satisfied with status quo. Set your goals high enough so that if you don’t reach that particular level, if you slide back one more level, you will still have security.

I think there is a great future out there for young people. You must be trained and educated today as never before in order to be successful. The same basic materials are necessary for success today as were necessary for success in past years. We have a little bit higher technology, but it takes dedication, hard work, some ability. But average people with average ability can go further if they have these inherent qualities of dedication and determination and “stick-to-iteness” rather than being too particularly endowed intellectually or financially to the point that they waste what they’re doing. I think that people today, for the most part, do what they want to do and accomplish what they want to do if given any reasonable effort.

Conclusion

Dr. Charles Boyette is a vital, dynamic man. Not only is he a skilled and dedicated physician; he is also a man who cares enough about his fellow man to try to make a valuable contribution to the political needs of his community.

We were much impressed that Dr. Boyette finds the time to divide among his many interests. He expertly balances his practice and his mayoral duties.

Dr. Boyette is the epitome of the classic American success story. He was a small town boy who by his determination and hard work achieved his aspirations. He shared this advice with us: “If you work hard and have the will and determination—no goal is unreachable.”