

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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Dr. Charles Sprague, first president of UT Southwestern, remembered for his visionary leadership

DALLAS – Sept. 19, 2005 – Dr. Charles Cameron Sprague, the first president of UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas and a visionary leader who ignited the medical center's explosive growth, died Sept. 17 in Dallas, at the age of 88.

A memorial service is scheduled for 2 p.m. Thursday at First Presbyterian Church of Dallas, 408 Park Ave. Burial will be private.

Described by friends and colleagues as an outstanding physician and teacher possessing unique qualities of leadership and personal warmth, Dr. Sprague guided Southwestern Medical School and UT Southwestern for nearly 19 years. Upon his retirement in 1986, he was named president emeritus of the medical center and joined Southwestern Medical Foundation, becoming chairman of the board and chief executive officer in 1988. In 1995 he was named chairman emeritus of the foundation.

Gregarious, with a booming baritone voice and an engaging smile, Dr. Sprague joined UT Southwestern as its top administrator, dean of Southwestern Medical School, in 1967. Five years later, upon the school's reorganization as a comprehensive academic medical center with three distinct schools (medical, graduate biomedical sciences and allied health sciences), he became the institution's first president.

Under Dr. Sprague's leadership, UT Southwestern added \$80 million in new building projects. Southwestern Medical School grew from a regional facility into a nationally renowned medical complex. The medical center began receiving international recognition for its strong research accomplishments and assemblage of awarding-winning faculty members, many of whom were recruited by Dr. Sprague.

"Charlie Sprague was the catalyst that enabled UT Southwestern Medical School to grow from a small, relatively unknown institution into one of the most highly respected medical schools in the nation," said Paul M. Bass, chairman of Southwestern Medical Foundation, vice chairman of First Southwest Co. and a close friend of Dr. Sprague. "His unselfish commitment to the medical community and to the well-being of his fellow citizens is unsurpassed.

"Dr. Sprague had the vision to meld the best aspects of teaching, research and patient care so as to achieve the utmost benefit for us all. His contributions to Southwestern Medical Foundation will never be exceeded."

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Born in Dallas on Nov. 16, 1916, Dr. Sprague was raised in a household characterized by devotion to community, church and service – influences that stayed with him throughout his life.

A gifted athlete and captain of both the football and basketball teams at Southern Methodist University, Dr. Sprague had no interest in becoming a doctor until sustaining a knee injury during his junior year. Too late to change majors, Dr. Sprague added a fifth year of college to complete pre-med requirements and graduated with bachelors' degrees in both science and business administration from SMU in 1940. A medical degree from UT Medical Branch (UTMB) in Galveston followed, as well as a stint in the Navy and service in the South Pacific.

Dr. Sprague embarked on his medical career in New Orleans in 1947 as an internal medicine resident at Charity Hospital. A year later, he was named a fellow and instructor at Tulane University School of Medicine, where he established a division of hematology.

Soon after, Dr. Sprague was awarded a fellowship to study hematology at Washington University in St. Louis and then one at Oxford University School of Medicine in England. He returned to Tulane in 1952 as assistant professor and director of the hematology laboratory, was promoted to associate professor in 1954, made full professor in 1962 and was appointed dean of the medical school the following year.

It wasn't at Tulane, however, that Dr. Sprague's vision for the future was to be fulfilled. A presentation to the university's governing board for construction of a new medical school and university hospital campus away from downtown New Orleans was rejected. By the end of 1966, it was apparent that Dr. Sprague's ideas were "too risky," he commented at the time, opening himself up for a move back to Dallas.

"UT Southwestern and Dallas were extraordinarily fortunate that Charlie Sprague agreed to become the medical school's leader in 1967," said Dr. Kern Wildenthal, Dr. Sprague's successor as president of the medical center, who also served as dean under him. "He had an instinctive vision of what was required to move the institution to greatness and an ability to persuade everyone he dealt with of the importance and value of his goals. He was the classic example of the right man for the right job at the right time.

"Dr. Sprague's integrity and trustworthiness were absolute. He inspired and enriched the lives of all of us who had the privilege of working with him and learning from him."

When Dr. Sprague arrived at UT Southwestern, the medical center consisted of three academic buildings attached to Parkland Memorial Hospital. Filing cabinets and scientific equipment lined hallways and full-time professors squeezed into broom-closet-sized offices.

Bringing with him an infusion of new energy, the Dallas native advanced the philosophy that a marriage of strong basic science with excellent clinical care would create an outstanding medical institution in his hometown.

He initiated a major expansion, both in the institution's physical facilities and its faculty appointments, and UT Southwestern Medical School began its rise to the highest ranks of American academic medicine.

He oversaw the development of an extensive plan for a "life sciences" campus, which included an initial \$40 million building expansion, unprecedented at the time in Dallas; doubled medical school enrollment within 10 years; and expanded allied health and research training programs.

Under Dr. Sprague's tenure, new independent departments were established and new research centers were created to investigate human growth and development, heart disease, nuclear medicine, human nutrition and arthritis. A medical library was built, as were lecture and seminar rooms to house larger classes.

During the 1970s, the heart of UT Southwestern's initial campus was completed, with the Philip R. Jonsson Basic Science Research Building, the Eugene McDermott Academic Administration Building, the Tom and Lula Gooch Auditorium, the Eugene McDermott Plaza and lecture rooms, the Cecil H. and Ida Green Science Building, the Fred F. Florence Bioinformation Center, and the Harry S. Moss Clinical Science Building.

Additional buildings totaling another 300,000 square feet were added during his tenure in the 1980s.

Attention to recruiting world-class scientists and physicians to UT Southwestern was a crucial part of Dr. Sprague's multifaceted plan, and many of the world's brightest minds traveled to Dallas and joined UT Southwestern's ranks, lured by an atmosphere of community spirit and an institutional ambition for excellence.

In 1979 Dr. Ronald W. Estabrook became UT Southwestern's first faculty member to be elected to the National Academy of Sciences, followed by seven other such recognitions before Dr. Sprague's retirement. In 1985, Drs. Michael Brown and Joseph Goldstein won the Nobel Prize, the first ever awarded to Texas researchers.

Not only could Dr. Sprague persuade top-ranked doctors to join UT Southwestern, he was able to coax public funds out of the Texas Legislature and federal government, and private funds from the Dallas philanthropic community.

Dr. Sprague relinquished the reins of UT Southwestern to Dr. Wildenthal, current president, upon his retirement on Aug. 31, 1986, at the age of 69.

“Dr. Sprague, probably more than anyone else, is responsible for UT Southwestern growing as it has,” said Dr. Bobby Brown, a former baseball star and former president of the American League, as well as a Fort Worth cardiologist. “Dr. Wildenthal has carried his torch well, but it was Dr. Sprague who first brought the school to a mature medical institution of world renown.”

Dr. Brown, who counted Dr. Sprague as a close friend for more than 50 years, first met him at Tulane as a medical student in Dr. Sprague’s class.

“He was an outstanding clinician. He also conducted excellent research in hematology and eventually became an outstanding administrator,” Dr. Brown said. “You find very few doctors who are excellent in all three modalities, but he was.

“I can’t say enough good things about him as a close friend – someone who has contributed greatly to medicine and to the city of Dallas.”

While taking UT Southwestern to new heights, Dr. Sprague earned the respect and admiration of hundreds of friends and colleagues. He played major roles in scores of professional medical societies, community task forces, service organizations and church groups. The Charles Cameron Sprague Distinguished Chair in Biomedical Science and the Charles Cameron Sprague, M.D., Chair in Medical Science were established in his honor in 1982 and 1988. A new facility at UT Southwestern, the Charles Cameron Sprague Clinical Science Building, was named in his honor in 1989.

In 1995 Dr. Sprague received Southwestern Medical Foundation’s prestigious Ho Din Award, honoring the unique personal qualities of great physicians: knowledge, understanding and compassion. A year later, Southwestern Medical Foundation renamed its community service award – now the Charles Cameron Sprague Community Service Award – to honor the beloved physician. The award was created in 1991 to recognize individuals who provide significant support to the improvement of medical education, medical research and patient care.

Recently, Dr. Sprague’s alma mater, UTMB in Galveston, with the help of Southwestern Medical Foundation and the Hoblitzelle Foundation, established the Charles C. Sprague, M.D., Distinguished Professorship in Internal Medicine in the university’s division of hematology and oncology.

But Charlie Sprague was never one to pat himself on the back.

“In administration, you have to be able to enjoy vicariously the success of others and think maybe they couldn’t have done that quite so well without something you’ve done,” Dr. Sprague once told *The Dallas Morning News* in an interview. “You have to have the wisdom and ego strength to recruit people as good or better than you are and be comfortable with it, and delegate things to them and give them the authority they need to carry it out.”

Dr. Sprague is survived by his wife, Alayne Sprague, and daughter, Cynthia Cameron Sprague Hardesty, of Plano. Other survivors include four stepdaughters: Laura Reynolds of Mesquite, Victoria Nelson of Cohasset, Mass., Susan Nelson of Pittsboro, N.C., and Betty Heckman of Buffalo, N.Y.; two grandchildren and seven step-grandchildren.

Memorials may be made to First Presbyterian Church Foundation, 408 Park Ave., Dallas, 75201, or Southwestern Medical Foundation, 2305 Cedar Springs Road, Suite 150, Dallas, Texas, 75201.

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