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One Woman's Philanthropy Touches Hundreds of Physicians

Florence L. Smith had a dream of helping Virginia medical school students with their education. Before her death in 1952 the Norfolk, Virginia, physician's daughter entrusted **The Norfolk Foundation** to carry out her wishes for scholarships for students attending the Commonwealth's medical schools.

If Smith were alive today, she would be amazed to see what her initial contribution of \$460,000 has done. In the first 50 years, her fund provided in excess of \$2.4 million in scholarships to help educate more than 620 physicians who practice all over the country and in several foreign countries. Today, Smith's perpetual fund is valued at more than \$2 million and continues the work Smith planned more than half a century ago. Currently 25 medical students receive \$103,000 in scholarships from her fund. In the first three decades, the Smith fund paid for most students' complete medical school costs. Today, with the rising cost of education, Smith scholarships average \$4,120 a year and are renewable for four years of study.



Florence Smith's bequest is still funding scholar-ships more than half a century later.

"The scholarship made it possible for me to go to medical school," recalls Dr. Edward L. Lilly, a Norfolk internist who attended the Medical College of Virginia at Virginia Commonwealth University in the 1960s. "The foundation's scholarship was an important part of my life."

Smith is all but forgotten today except for the ongoing generosity of her scholarship. Her 22-line obituary told only that she was born in New Orleans and came to live in Norfolk as a child. She was the daughter of Dr. Hy and Julia Tyler Smith, and her only brother, H. Tyler Smith, died six months earlier. No other family members survived her.

Her heirs are the hundreds of physicians educated with the help of Smith scholarships. Among them are former presidents of the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Ophthalmology, The National Foundation for Infectious Diseases and numerous state medical societies. The current president of the International Society of Pediatric Surgical Oncology is a Smith scholar as are missionaries in Kenya and the United Arab Emirates. Other Smith scholars are conducting important medical research and teaching at medical schools as well as providing primary and specialized care to thousands of patients.

Dr. John T. Nuckols, a Fredericksburg, Virginia, psychiatrist, is among those touched by Smith's philanthropy more than three decades ago. He believes Florence Smith played an integral part in shaping his life. "I had some 18 to 20 part-time jobs to pay for college," Nuckols says. "Then in my senior year Florence Smith came into my life, and this allowed me to devote full attention to my medical studies. I say a little prayer to Florence Smith each day."

At the time of Smith's gift in 1952, The Norfolk Foundation was only two years old and held just one other fund. Smith was led to the foundation by her attorney Barron F. Black, a foundation founder who convinced her that the fledgling foundation was the right place to carry out her wishes. Since then the foundation has grown into one of the largest community foundations in the country and has become southeastern Virginia's largest scholarship provider and grantmaker. It also is among the top providers of medical scholarships at Virginia's three medical schools. The Smith fund is one of more than 40 scholarship funds administered by the foundation.

In her will, Smith named only the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond and the Medical School

of the University of Virginia as beneficiaries of her scholarships. However, her scholarship was expanded to Norfolk's Eastern Virginia Medical School after it was formed in 1977 in her hometown.

“When EVMS came along and it didn't qualify for scholarships because it wasn't a named school, we went to court,” recalls Toy D. Savage Jr., vice chairman of The Norfolk Foundation board. “We told the court that if EVMS had been in existence when Miss Smith drew up her trust, it would have been included.” The court agreed, and EVMS students became eligible to compete for scholarships.

For Trey H. Leaven of Norfolk, Virginia, a third-year student at Eastern Virginia Medical School, “The Norfolk Foundation scholarship has been an overwhelmingly affirmative presence in my life by loosening the manacles of student debt so I can focus on job one—taking care of the patient.”

LEAVE A LEGACY® wishes to thank [The Norfolk Foundation](#) for sharing this story.