

The evolving role of SBAS – We’re getting in but we’re not going on

Malcolm V. Brock

Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, 1650 Orleans Street, Baltimore, MD, 21287, United States, E-mail: Malcolm@uabmc.edu

Abstract

It has been my distinct pleasure to serve as your President over this past year. The salient tradition of a SBAS Presidency has been to leave the organization just a little better than when inaugurated, and to make some lasting contribution. It has been truly a group effort. I have had help from a great many people this year especially the tireless work of the central office. Lovie Brown and Molly Britain – would you stand please. I received tremendous support from many officers on the Executive Committee such as Drs. Pugh, Karpeh, and Stewart who were on fast dial, the selflessness of so many of the past Presidents who gave so freely of their time (immediate Past President Dr. Stallion called me every two weeks to discuss strategy maintaining a tradition that Past President Turner gave him; Past Presidents Vickers, Higgins, Cornwell, Kirton and Stain started giving me high-octane advice and constant advocacy even before my Presidency started), our Executive Director who made it always clear that he would be a text away and he was, our historian, Dr. Fred Cason who gave me constant air cover so that I could take the risks that this position demands, Committee Chairs and Committee members who did a lot of the yeoman work, and most importantly, you the members of SBAS who have been energetic and vocal with suggestions, praises, and of course, like all vibrant organizations, with criticisms. I want to acknowledge the support and tolerance of family, especially the love of my wife of 30 years, Ronae, my parents who gave love and guidance, my two sisters – Arlene and Michelle, and niece, Tsilala, all who are in the audience as well as our three children – Maquira, Meleina, and Mayalen.

Children truly do enrich one’s life, and as everyone in this organization is a testament, giving them a solid education is a solemn responsibility of every parent. When our oldest child, Maquira, was born, we found an elementary school with a great reputation in Baltimore but we didn’t have much money and we were living quite a distance away “on the proverbial wrong side of the tracks”. The school gave a “ride sharing” handout to all new families so that you could contact those who lived nearby and carpool. Even on the other side of the tracks, there was one family close by. So, that first year Rebecca and Maquira often car-pooled to school and here is a photo of them at the end of that first year. Even though Rebecca and her family were living near us well away from the best neighborhoods of Baltimore, Rebecca’s family had been in Baltimore for generations, and in fact, her great, great grandfather was rather famous

around town, as well as in all American surgery, as he was JMT Finney, the first President of the American College of Surgeons.

In Chicago, IL, on November 13, 1913, Dr. JMT Finney found himself during his Presidency presiding over a particular contentious meeting of the Board of Regents. It was the last meeting to discuss the admission of candidates to the very first class of Fellows for the American College of Surgeons, during which the name of the first woman Florence West Duckering MD from New England Deaconess was read and confirmed, along with Dr. Daniel Halle Williams. Dr. Williams was on the staff of St. Luke’s Hospital and highly regarded by all who had observed him in the operating room. He was born in 1856 in Hollidaysberg, Pennsylvania in a free negro family but had to move to Baltimore, MD and discontinue his schooling after his father died when Daniel was just ten years old. He was apprenticed to a cobbler but left after two years of “pushing needles through smelly hides” and persuaded a rail man to give him a pass to go west to find his mother who was then living in Rockford, IL. His mother later remarked, “anyone with so much spunk could easily take care of himself.” By 17 years old, he was running his own barbershop in Edgerton Wisconsin, and through numerous coincidences and connections through customers, he eventually met and convinced Dr. Henry Palmer, a prominent, highly skilled surgeon and ex-major to take him on as an apprentice. Williams then went on to study at the prestigious Chicago Medical School where he graduated in 1883. On January 23, 1891, using his position on the Illinois State Board of Health and connections to philanthropists, he founded the Provident Hospital and Training School Association to fulfill a need for a place where young black nurses could train. His operative skills became widely known and, on July 9, 1893 when a young black expressman, James Cornish, was stabbed in a saloon not far from Provident hospital, Dr. Williams, against the medical opinion of the day, made the decision to explore the chest, and alleviate what was undoubtedly a cardiac tamponade. Mr. Cornish outlived his surgeon dying 50 years later in 1943.

A mere thirty-odd years later, our society, SBAS, was founded, born out of this long history of resilience of black surgeons confronting barriers to entry to American Surgery. Our co-founder, Dr. Claude Organ, was well aware of this history, and in fact, in the early spring of 1987, just months before the infamous October Marriott hotel room first “brainstorming” meeting where the idea of SBAS was conceived, he published, “A Century of Black Surgeons” which chronicles much of the history that I’ve reviewed

today. We will never fully know, but some of his thoughts about the necessity of an organization like SBAS must have been formulated during those long, hard hours writing his two volume history.

My mentor, the late Dr. Levi Watkins who spent his entire career at Johns Hopkins, early in his tenure worked tirelessly to increase the number of black medical students and residents at our institution. Here is his copy of Dr. Claude Organ's book dated April 10, 1987 just before SBAS began, and this book has been handed down to me (I held it up), a testament that no-one in this room is too far from this history. But the ACS has evolved and in the three years before Dr. Watkins untimely death in 2015, approximately 6% of ACS inductees were African Americans. As our Executive Director and past president, LD Britt, who became the first African American chair of the Board of Regents, has remarked, "The evolution of the American College of Surgeons, the world's largest organization for surgeons, and its growing partnership with the Society of Black Academic Surgeons needs to be recognized, underscored, and continually enhanced." Another of the co-founding members and past President of SBAS, Dr. Eddie Hoover, commented, "The hero of academic African American surgeons, Dr. Charles Drew, adorns the shield of SBAS as much for his defiance of ACS for refusing to accept other well-qualified African American surgeons in the 1940s as for his scientific contributions...(But) With strong ACS support, SBAS has been stunningly successful over the past 27 years..."

The data support these assertions. Our Executive Director along with SBAS member Dr. Paris Butler pointed out the deficit in numbers in tenured black surgical professors highlighting that majority whites comprised about 86% of these positions. Although SBAS has undoubtedly had successes since 1987, with over a dozen chairs and 5 deans in majority schools, there is still room for SBAS to grow in its vision and leverage its influence to become a clearinghouse for division chiefs and department chairs. For example, as women chairs have proliferated, most have been majority women with no African Americans. This year under the leadership of the Chair of the SBAS Women in Surgery Committee, Dr. Cherisse Berry and the Association of Woman's Surgery President, Dr. Sareh Parangi, an exciting collaboration has begun, focused on diversity and inclusion of women in surgical leadership. This includes a proposal to sponsor an AWS-SBAS visiting professorship for SBAS mid-career women to give them exposure to leading majority institutions across the country.

Just last summer, Past President Higgins, as Director of the SBAS Leadership and Faculty Development Institute, pitched an innovative idea to the American Surgical Association (ASA) - the establishment of a shadowing experience for SBAS mid-career members with department

chairs, Center Directors, Deans, CEOs or equivalent. This year working with SAAS, AWS, and the SUS, and with the support of ASA President, Dr Christopher Ellison, these four organizations collaborated to share the limited time and resources of ASA leaders by forming a joint ASA Surgical leadership Fellowship in which Associate or Professor members will visit two academic institutions for experiential leadership mentoring for one week each. The Fellowship was unanimously approved by the ASA Council on April 10, 2019. During the even years of the fellowship beginning in 2020, the AWS and SAAS will each submit three names to the ASA Council. For the odd years of the fellowship, beginning in 2021, SBAS and SUS will each submit three names.

As we grow and increase these collaborations, SBAS will be expected to share in the cost and carry its own weight. Without funding, there is no mission. This year, we started the SBAS Foundation and I am proud to say that we received \$110,000 in pledges including 100% commitment from all of our Past Presidents. This foundation will have a renewed focus on mid-career SBAS members and help to pay for some of our collaborative leadership opportunities. Other organizations, such as the AWS, have utilized their Foundation over the years in this way, and as we have seen, have been tremendously successful in promoting leaders.

Our recent growth in the last 2-3 years, has also this year highlighted our need to supplement our existing partnerships with academic institutions by embracing new long-term partnerships with Industry. This year we have a host of industry partners who are supporting SBAS. But, they are not interested in just a one off sponsoring of a single meeting, but instead a long-term partnership which would be mutually beneficial to both parties. They spoke to us about setting up travel bursaries, research scholarships, and awards while they would like to harness the "energy in the room" and engage the significant brain trust of SBAS members about value-based medicine especially as it pertains to the health of the minority community.

As we continue to grow and evolve, I encourage all of us to remember the lessons of our resilient history especially the one that says that any ascendance to leadership must first be built on a foundation of academic excellence, and only then (as we saw in the Board of Regents meeting about 100 years ago) can active sponsorship really be effective. The year 2019 marks 30 years since our inaugural conference at Duke University in 1989. The mentorship and sponsorship of SBAS remains relevant, our annual meeting continues to be vibrant with new workshop offerings, and our organization has proven nimble. Moreover, SBAS is up to the challenge of serving the needs of our members for many years to come.