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FEATURED

Rosetta Keeton is 2020 Lifetime Achiever in Healthcare Empowering patients for 30-plus years

By Rebecca Rivas

Jun 4, 2020



Rosetta Keeton, director of patient access at the St. Louis Regional Health Commission, is the St. Louis American Foundation's 2020 Lifetime Achiever in Healthcare.

Photo by Wiley Price / St. Louis American

When patient advocate Rosetta Keeton was young, her father worked three jobs to take care of his wife and five children.

But he was ill, Keeton said, and didn't have insurance. As she got older, Keeton would take her father to the emergency room at Homer G. Phillips Hospital, where nurses would greet him warmly.

"People were very kind to him, but he was in a system of people who looked like him, who understood him, who knew the plight of this man trying to take care of his wife and five children," Keeton said.



Keeton, now the director of patient access at the St. Louis Regional Health Commission, will be honored by the St. Louis American Foundation as its 2020 Lifetime Achiever in Health Care.

She has been a patient advocate and ombudsman in St. Louis for more than 30 years. She believes her lifetime dedication to fighting for patients' rights stems from the closure of Homer G. Phillips Hospital in 1979. Like many throughout St. Louis, Keeton believes that "a part of the black world in St. Louis died" when the teaching hospital closed — and her community has not been able to get equitable healthcare since.

"I think about that in terms of today when some patients go to the emergency room because they can't take off their jobs," Keeton said. "They don't have insurance. How kind those people were to my father when he came to the emergency room, versus the comments I hear of patients going into the emergency room now. For me to see my people going into systems where people didn't understand them, understand their plights, I guess that's where it came from."

Since then, Keeton has been fighting for the rights of patients who don't have insurance.

“Healthcare to me is a human right,” Keeton said. “And quality healthcare should be a human right. As much as I can, I try to get them what they need.”

Her advocacy started while working healthcare jobs in the 1970s, when she took it upon herself to help patients understand their medical bills, even if it meant going to their houses on Saturdays.

“My job was to talk to these patients, get to know them, understand what their problems were and represent them if they had issues that they couldn’t resolve or didn’t have anybody to talk about,” Keeton said.



“And we found there were a lot of instances where a lot of people intentionally or unintentionally violated patient rights. Some people were amenable to changing – some people weren’t. Some departments and some organizations were amenable, and some weren’t. So it was our job to help the patient.”

At one of those early jobs, at the now-demolished Truman Restorative Center on Arsenal Street in South St. Louis, Keeton said her mentor Jackie Jackson taught her that there are two sides to every story – and then there’s the truth.

“That was the hardest thing to learn: what was the truth?” Keeton said. “As I grew in advocacy, I never forgot that you must look for the truth. And the truth will tell you what should actually be done. If there is an inequity, you’ll see it. The truth will tell you.”

Keeton grew up in public housing projects in St. Louis, living with her hardworking father, stay-at-home mother, two sisters and two brothers.

“We had a good, loving, wonderful family, so we were rich – more rich than some of these people who have lots of money,” Keeton said. “We were poor economically and ... statistically I should not have been able to get past high school, if I made it that far.”

Keeton beat the educational odds, earning a master’s degree in health administration from Webster University and a bachelor’s degree in interdisciplinary sciences from Saint Louis University.

Among her community collaborations, she developed an abstinence-only education project for youth who learned visual arts, performing arts and music creation as an alternative to engaging in sexual activities. She worked with residents living in St. Louis ZIP codes at high risk for chronic diseases to increase health literacy and become active participants in their own health care. And she enlisted members of the Board of Aldermen to make the case for public health care needs in North St. Louis. She also is the founder and facilitator of Sistah Connection, one of the oldest local breast cancer support groups.

She was a 2012 St. Louis American Salute to Excellence in Health Care award winner and, more recently, served as the keynote speaker at the Homer G. Phillips Nurses Alumni, Inc. annual meeting.

Rikki Takeyama Menn, the Regional Health Commission’s vice president of strategic engagement, said, “As Ms. Keeton plans to retire in 2020, we want to recognize the many years she’s advocated for her community, empowered thousands of patients, and provided a voice for the sick.”

The 20th Annual Salute to Excellence in Health Care Awards will be celebrated online as a free virtual event on Thursday, July 9. For additional details on how to participate, please visit www.stlamerican.com.

