



**2023 Peace in the Pages
Presented by David and Monique Miller
Award Honorees**

READ TO REMEMBER

Dr. Floyd Willis, Mayo Clinic



Dr. Floyd Willis grew up in Forsyth, Georgia, where his father owned and ran the local funeral home and wanted his son to follow in his footsteps. Back in the 1970's, ambulance service was provided by funeral homes and when Floyd's father discovered that only Caucasian funeral directors were getting paid for that service, he approached the county about the obvious racial discrimination and was told the Caucasian funeral directors were paid to be licensed medical technicians and "we didn't think you boys could take the test and pass it." Floyd's dad got other black funeral directors together and they went about becoming licensed medical technicians. "When Dad asked me to help him study the test questions, I really liked the medical aspect - the EKGs, blood pressure, and the rest," Floyd remembers, "So, after Dad passed the test, I told him I'd decided to go into the medical field on the living side."

As a funeral director who was married to an 8th grade English teacher, Floyd's parents were leading citizens in their small town. When voting initiatives and voting drives came along, they had a sample ballot machine in their home that was available to all. Funeral directors were responsible for insurance papers and getting people home from Germany and, as a teacher, Floyd's mother was a leader in education. "Mother had her class memorize poetry and then she brought it home and made me memorize it, too," he recalls. The one Floyd remembers to this day, and has lived by, is titled "Be the Best of Whatever You Are," by Douglas Malloch.

After graduating from Yale University, Dr. Floyd Willis went to medical school at Morehouse College in Atlanta and did his residency at Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. Having always wanted to be a family doctor in a small town, he settled in Carrollton, Georgia and opened his own practice, but in 1992, Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville enlisted him to start the first Department of Family Medicine. There were 100 doctors at Mayo in 1992 and Floyd Willis was the only African American doctor and the only family physician. Today, Mayo Clinic has four Family Medicine sites with over 40 physicians and 20 residents.

Dr. Willis has become widely known for his in-depth research on inclusive Alzheimer's disease and other maladies affecting minorities, and he is also working with the Wilson Scholars Program that exposes mostly under-represented medical students to Mayo Clinic, creating a more diverse staff of physicians. Always a family physician at heart, Dr. Willis still sees patients daily. And, speaking of family, Dr. Willis's wife, Wanda, is a leader at the Community Foundation of Northeast Florida, and they have two successful adult children, Jackson and Joy.

As to being honored with the READ TO REMEMBER Award by READ USA, Dr. Willis is impressed with the teen tutoring program that has been initiated by READ USA. "When my children were growing up, I stressed to them that the most important profession on earth is teaching. That is what READ USA is doing - providing the free books and teaching students how to read and understand them. I've been an adjunct professor in three different medical schools and Mayo attracted me because it was said that we may have the opportunity to begin a teaching program. This was exciting to me," said Dr. Willis. "It is the reading, the learning, and the teaching that is really important in everything."