

Cutler Bay NEWS

FEB. 19 - MAR. 4, 2013

communitynewspapers.com

305-669-7355

CHI: Woman's vision brought healthcare to underserved

BY TIFFANI HELBERG

Thomasina Simpson, 86, smiled as she looked at a photograph of her late mother, Doris Ison. The picture seemed to conjure up proud memories of the Florida City visionary and activist.

Simpson's recollection of her mother's healthcare legacy comes and goes. But when it is there, Simpson comes alive, beaming with honor.

"She was never satisfied," Simpson said about her mother.

That dissatisfaction was well warranted back in the 1960s. Back then African-Americans living in Florida City and South Miami-Dade did not have access to local healthcare facilities. James Archer Smith was the closest hospital in Homestead, but at the time blacks were turned away. The journey to Jackson Memorial in Miami was sometimes fatal for those seeking medical help.

"It was a struggle," said Carolyn Taylor-Pates, Ison's niece and CHI board member. "Kids were dying on the way to Jackson Hospital."

That struggle and the mounting death toll were the matches that ignited a flame inside of Ison. Even though she only had a third grade education, Ison compelled doctors and legislators to create a healthcare center in South Miami-Dade. The Doris Ison Health Care Center was born as just two meager trailers and a few volunteer doctors that Ison had gathered from her church. It was a beacon of hope for a community that had suffered for too long without adequate healthcare.

That heroic act of activism snowballed into a top ranking non-profit healthcare company that has grown year by year. In fact, Ison wanted to make sure that the migrant workers also received proper medical care.

"She was walking down the street one day and found a group of Mexicans in the field," Simpson recalled. "One of the children had whooping cough and she wanted to know



Pictured standing in front of Doris Ison's Florida City home are (l-r) Toni Rogers-Manning, granddaughter; Thomasina Simpson, daughter, and Carolyn Taylor-Pates, niece.

why they hadn't seen a doctor."

She discovered migrants shared the same lack of access to healthcare that blacks were experiencing at the time. So she began to make sure that their needs were addressed as well.

"My grandmother was a champion for all people," said Toni Rogers-Manning, Ison's granddaughter.

When Ison died in 1989 CHI had grown out of its trailers and was operating with four healthcare center buildings throughout South Miami-Dade.

"I never envisioned it to be this big," Rogers-Manning said. "So for me, I'm overwhelmed that my grandmother, her dream could be ongoing."

Today Ison's legacy continues to grow. By March, CHI will be opening three new healthcare centers bringing its total number

of centers to 10. What was once the only place that blacks down south could go for healthcare now is an all-inclusive healthcare center. People of all ethnicities and income levels go to CHI for a host of healthcare needs.

Those who can't afford it are taken care of and others are given a sliding scale fee to work within their budget. It has grown from a few volunteer doctors to a staff of more than 600 people with a wide variety of specialties: pediatrics, ob-gyn, family medicine, radiology, mental health, dental and much more.

"I think that they did a great job," Simpson said with a smile.

The now elderly daughter gleamed with hope for the future of her mother's legacy, a legacy born out of such a meager beginning.