

# Claude H. Organ, Jr, MD

## *Another Surgical Doyen Who Died Too Soon*

Eddie L. Hoover, MD

When I joined the faculty at State University of New York–Brooklyn (Downstate), Bernard Jaffe, MD, had a very organized system involving visiting professors in which each faculty member received the guest in his or her own office for a private meeting. I am confident that many of these sessions resulted in mentoring relationships that exist to this day. Such was the case with Dr Organ and me after he visited Downstate in the early '80s. Early in this mentor-mentee relationship, I learned that when Dr Organ called you and asked you to send him your CV, bibliography, reprint, or whatever, he was proffering you to some organization, association, or event, although he would never tell you what he was up to. He also taught me to be thorough and exhaustive in my research before promoting anyone for anything because he loathed not being successful on the first attempt at anything. He had a unique ability to be able to spend some time with practically everyone at any given meeting, and you always felt that this was “private time with the master” because that is how he treated it. The venue could have been a small organization such as the Society of Black Academic Surgeons or the American College of Surgeons (Chicago, Ill). Even as our relationship matured, it was still very difficult to call him by his first name. Oftentimes he would say, “You can just call me Claude,” but I was a product of the old school.

Dr Organ was always supportive even if he did not agree with a particular decision of yours. During my career, I made a particular move that he thought was not in my best interest, which he explained to me in

his usual thorough and logical manner. After I decided to do it anyway, instead of leaving me to fend for myself, he did an instant 180° turn and within 48 hours called me with his thoughts and ideas as to what the problems were with my new position and how best to deal with them. Dr Organ was not afraid to let us experiment and even border on failure if the experience would make us a better surgeon, scientist, or human being. However, you knew that he had forgiven you when he flashed that famous “Organ smile” with the accompanying head tilt.

Even after I rose through the ranks to become professor and chairman at 2 institutions, I was always amazed at the breadth and expanse of Dr Organ's accomplishments, interests, and mastery of new technologies. He held the top positions in organizations in which most of us are just thrilled to gain membership. Few people know what a key role he played in the establishment of the Morehouse School of Medicine (Atlanta, Ga) as a member of the original site team by “convincing” Emory University (Atlanta) officials that Atlanta was big enough to support 2 medical schools since Omaha, Neb, had done so successfully with a much smaller population. I would call his office on many occasions only to be told that he was at the board meeting of Alpha Omega Alpha or he was at a meeting of the US Medical Licensing Examination (Philadelphia, Pa), the Board of Trustees at Howard University (Washington, DC), or his beloved Xavier University (New Orleans, La) or that he was in England, Australia/New Zealand, Nigeria, or South Africa receiving yet another high accolade. Yet, he always maintained the highest academic standards back home for his residents and faculty and continued to be an

operating surgeon and an active member of his community in Omaha, Oklahoma City, Okla, and Oakland, Calif.

Of course it takes a remarkable lady to keep a person like Dr Organ at such lofty levels, and he always had Mrs Organ. This regal and elegant lady was always the rallying point for Dr Organ and their children. Dr Organ was fortunate to have had a second very special lady in his life: Margaret Kosiba. As we were organizing the commemorative dinner for the Organs in New Orleans in 2001, I learned the true measure of Ms Kosiba's contributions to Dr Organ's success over the years. I had known her for years, of course, and had worked with her as a board member of the ARCHIVES but had never worked with her on a project of this magnitude.

Dr Organ was particularly proud of the people who served on the board of the ARCHIVES. When I accepted the position as editor in chief of the *Journal of the National Medical Association* in June of 2004, Dr Organ called to congratulate me and also to tell me that he now had 5 board members who were editors of major journals. Of course, Dr Organ trained scores of surgeons who will be making him proud for the next 30 years. I wish I had the space to comment on his many, many quotes; quirks; and “Claudisms,” which deserve a section of their own. I would just like to offer my own opinion as to how Dr Organ gained some of his inner strength from one event and one person in his life that are intertwined. First is the well-known story as to how he arrived at Creighton University (Omaha), having been accepted into medical school in his native state of Texas and then being denied admission when he showed up. They had assumed that he was white and that he had graduated from Xavier Univer-

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sity in Cincinnati, Ohio. The second involves Dr Organ's lifelong fascination with Charles R. Drew, MD, one of his heroes who could have passed for white but insisted on wearing his true color as a badge of honor. Dr Organ always insisted that you had to "stand for something" and that others should know that quality in you. He was enthralled by the life and times of Dr Drew and how he was able to accomplish what he did as a surgeon/scientist when segregation was the order of the day. In fact, Dr Drew refused to join the American College of Surgeons because it refused to admit other well-qualified black surgeons, most of whom he had trained at Howard University. Dr Organ surely must have shared some of Dr Drew's pain for the remainder of his life after his Texas experience. Several years ago, Dr Organ gave one of the named lec-

tures at the opening ceremonies of the American College of Surgeons of which he was president the last year of his life. His topic was "Charles R. Drew: A Doyen of American Surgery." I think that Dr Organ would have been thrilled to have been a contemporary of Dr Drew. His presidential address before the Society of Black Academic Surgeons several years ago was entitled "Dr Charles R. Drew: Died Too Soon." And so did Dr Organ: another surgical doyen who died too soon.

Dr Organ would always tell us that he did not want us to be as good as he was; we had to be better than him. We knew that this was impossible but it drove us to perhaps be better than we otherwise might have been. He insisted that it all started with hard work, preparation, and persistence. I have often commented that I spoke to Dr Organ

more than I did my father and was not sure whether that made me a bad son or not. My mother died when I was flying home in August of 2001 from the final planning session for the Organ dinner, and my father died 2 weeks before the dinner. So for the next 4 years, Dr Organ was more than just a mentor. I shall miss him terribly forever, but I will always remember everything that he taught me and try diligently to live up to his high standards and to pass his teachings on to future generations of surgeons.

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## In Memory: Claude H. Organ, Jr, MD

### *The Reassuring Voice of Optimism Across the San Francisco Bay*

Haile T. Debas, MD

One of the great privileges of my academic life has been to have Claude as a close and inspiring friend and colleague. I know others will write about his enormous contributions to American and world surgery. I have, therefore, decided to write more personally and speak to what his presence in Oakland, Calif, meant to me—the reassuring voice of optimism across the San Francisco Bay.

I will miss the frequent telephone calls we exchanged across the San Francisco Bay, sharing our successes and our challenges. We confided in each other problems of the moment, and from my dealings with him, I learned that nothing is more important than having a trusted friend with whom you can share

your happy and sad moments. Almost always, I got off the telephone with Claude with a smile on my face and with the belief in my heart that everything would turn out for the better. And often I got off the telephone laughing uncontrollably because, as only Claude could, he had shared a very funny joke that was just appropriate for the occasion.

An attribute of Claude that never ceased to inspire me was his uncompromising commitment to the career and well-being of his trainees. The calls from the East Bay were often about his trainees and about his plans for their research training. They obviously gave him a great joy and constituted an important part of his academic life. Given all the academic and municipal politics at the time, no one could have been able to establish the stellar general surgery residency that Claude created

in the East Bay. He had a gift for identifying and recruiting trainees with potential. Once he did, he was totally committed to them as a teacher, mentor, and loving father figure. He made sure that his residents had access to training in the best research laboratories in the best universities in the country. Characteristically, even when these residents were away during their research training, he kept in close touch with the students and with their supervisors and assured that, at all times and in every way, they were well taken care of professionally and personally. I mention these details to indicate how Claude made his trainees his everyday concern. He loved them and was fiercely proud of their accomplishments.

Claude was a giant among men, a hero and inspiration to his trainees and to all minority academic sur-

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