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BELOW THE LINE

USC UPSTATE CHANCELLOR BENNIE L. HARRIS
SPEAKS WITH CLARENCE SEVILLIAN



Clarence Sevillian (left) and Dr. Bennie Harris / Photo Provided

Welcome to Below the Line, a monthly question-and-answer column in which Chancellor Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D., of the University of South Carolina Upstate interviews a leader about change, technology, education, and leadership. This month, Dr. Harris spoke with Clarence Sevillian, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer for Prisma Health.

This article has been edited for content, length, and clarity.

Harris: Hi, Clarence. Thanks so much for sitting down with me today. I understand your career in health care began in 1998 when you were a staff physical therapist at McLaren Regional Medical Center. What drew you to that particular career? Have you always been interested in helping people?

Sevillian: When I was a young, energetic kid out of school, I had my eyes set on college and then becoming a corporate lawyer. That first semester, things quickly changed. I got into my first political science classes and said, you know, this is not for me. But I didn't know what I wanted to do. I sat down with counselors, and they asked, "What do you want to do?" I said that I like math, but I don't want to be a teacher. My parents were

in education, and I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to be an accountant.

I was fortunate enough to play football at Vanderbilt University, and through my career I had an injury or two that required me to have some athletic training and some physical therapy. By the end of my football career, being a purpose-driven individual, I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to make a difference and help people. I put it all together and decided to go into physical therapy.

When I got into PT school I had to do some volunteer work, and as part of that I went to my local healthcare company, which was McLaren, at the time. I hit it off with them. They told me they had a shortage of physical therapists and that if I signed on for three years they'd pay for school. I said, "Absolutely, yes."

So, I thought I was going to be a sports physical therapist. But when I got out, the only position available was on the inpatient rehab unit. I enjoyed it thoroughly.

Harris: Can you tell me about a particular situation or patient that sticks out in your mind from that time?

Sevillian: I met a 76-year-old patient I'll never forget — he'd had a severe stroke on one side of his body. I introduced myself, told him what to expect, and he said, "Kid, get away from me and let me die."

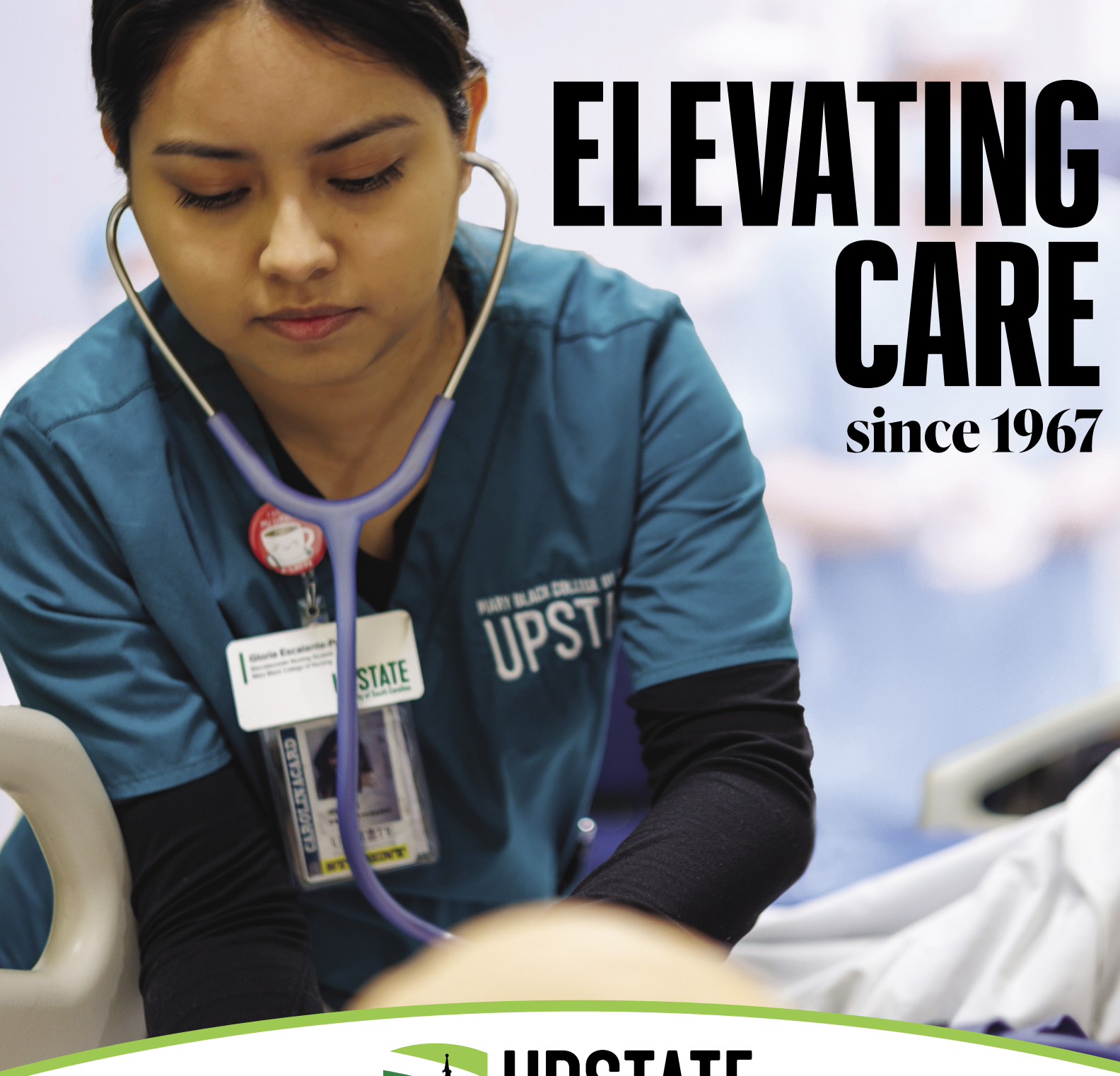
Obviously, in school, they don't teach you how to handle that. But I knew I couldn't let that happen to him. He gave me the same message for three days. On the fourth day I was able to break through. We did some passive range of motion and built a rapport. To make a long story short, he walked out of there with a quad-cane about two months later.

Later, I'm cutting my grass on a Saturday morning and look up and see him. He's walking with his wife as part of an exercise program I'd put him on. Their eyes met my eyes, and his wife ran up to me sobbing, giving me the biggest hug you can ever imagine. She said, "Thank you. Look what you've allowed us to do, because you didn't give up on us." That's where my life changed.

I knew that whatever I did next, I'd need to have an impact like this. So, I made it my goal to become a hospital CEO. But I didn't know where to go and didn't understand anything about leadership in health care.

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So, I reached out to our system CEO, cold-called him, and said, “You don’t know me, I don’t know you, but I want to be you one day. Would you be my mentor?” Fortunately, he took the call and became my mentor at the time.

Harris: *So, you ended up on the leadership track, moving up in the ranks. You eventually oversaw Doctor’s Hospital of Michigan’s 2008 transition to a majority physician-owned institution. What lessons did you learn from that experience?*

Sevillian: That was my first CEO job. The two biggest takeaways were: I learned about the importance of alignment with your team and the importance of preparation.

You think about getting a group of physicians who are smart, driven, and very passionate about the things that they like, want, and need to see. You’re trying to align that with the hospital’s new for-profit status. The key thing is to always put the patient in the middle.

Harris: *That interesting, putting the patient “in the middle.” It’s very much like the servant-leadership model, where you talk about the patient or the customer or the client.*

Sevillian: And you have to think beyond what happens inside our doors and look at what happens when they leave the hospital. You look at this as a healthcare journey, and a system, rather than just one case of illness. Do they have a grocery store? Do they have sidewalks? Do they have transportation to be able to go get their medications? That’s what we have to look at — the whole ecosystem of health care.

Harris: *As Chief Operating Officer at Prisma Health, what do you like best about your job?*

Sevillian: I’ve been at Prisma Health for 2½ years, and I would tell you the thing that I like most is that we have a team that is able to accomplish all the things that we’re talking about today. I can’t move the healthcare needle in South Carolina by myself. It’s a team approach.

Maybe that’s the football part of me, that looks at the team side of things, with keeping the patient in the middle. That’s what brings me to life if I’m having a bad day. I try to see every patient like they’re my mom, my dad, or another loved one. That’s important.

Harris: *What are your thoughts on the role of technology in health care? What about artificial intelligence?*

Sevillian: That’s going to help us tremendously. We can use AI to predict what’s going to happen. We can create models to see how a tumor might grow. It will allow us to really understand how we can better con-

nect with our patients. Even self-scheduling technology — it allows patients to have ownership and become more engaged with the process, and there is going to be better compliance and outcomes as a result.



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Harris: *It’s been said that you are good at building a culture of trust and connecting through communication. What is your sense of how important those two things are in leading any division or organization?*

Sevillian: Let’s take the Covid-19 pandemic as an example. Through that period, it was probably the toughest time of my entire health care career. All you’re doing at that point is putting out fires, and (dealing) with crises. So, things get lost sometimes, things related to strategy, growth, vision, financials, budgets. So, you have to be more transparent with your team and help them understand all the moving parts and pieces. You build up communication, and by doing so, you build the level of trust. That’s your credibility. And there will be another difficult thing that we have to address. But then you’ll have already earned your trust and the team can move in the direction you need them to move.

Harris: *I’d next like to talk about Leading Below the Line. What I mean by that is that oftentimes we don’t know what’s going on beneath the surface — for leaders and for their teams — and we have to dive in and find out exactly what’s at play in order to make a project or a plan successful.*

Sevillian: Yes. If, for example, it’s necessary to discipline an employee, don’t come to me and say, “I just want to get rid of him.” I need to know what you’ve done up to that point. Have you sat down during the evaluation and had that open, honest conversation about what you feel, what it is that they feel, and what are the things that are important to them? And this shouldn’t just happen at evaluations. This should be happening at a regular cadence so they can have a clear di-

rection and you can help them excel.

Don’t operate or lead by fear, but lead by an example. When you don’t have those conversations, when the trust is not there, people aren’t as transparent, and you don’t see what’s going on beneath the surface.

Harris: *Here’s a lighter question: From what I understand, you’re passionate about fitness — can you tell me more about that, and about how in this way you try to lead by example, when it comes to living a healthy life?*

Sevillian: A person may not be sports-minded or have the athletic ability. But I think it’s extremely important because it’s about so much more than just that sport, right? You think about an individual waking up every single morning, going to practice, and having to balance their homework in between. It teaches that kid discipline and hard work and ethical responsibilities. It makes a person more well-rounded. It teaches you so much that you can use in your career.

Maintaining the fitness side of it is extremely important to me because you practice what you preach. For me personally, if I didn’t get my workout in during the morning, I’m totally affected throughout the day. It allows me to be grounded, it humbles me, makes me accountable, and pays respect to the work we are doing to help people be healthier.

Harris: *I’m curious: Do you have a hero?*

Sevillian: Yes. Some folks may have a superhero like Superman or Batman, or a sports figure. Or it could be someone in music. But my hero is my dad. He’s always been, and he’s my best friend.

Not only did he teach me how to be a man, he was there every step of the way. He was a high school principal and superintendent, and he actually was my high school principal when I was coming up. But he really took the time and helped me understand what a proper education meant, and how to handle yourself in certain situations.

When I look at a hero, it’s someone who is going to help shape who you are and help make you want to be better. He was that guiding force and a true family man who treated my mother and my sister and my family right.

Harris: *One final question: Do you have a mantra or quote that speaks to you as a leader?*

Sevillian: “Be true to yourself.” There can always be challenging times. There will always be things that come at you every step of the way, and it can make you deviate from your focus. But I’m still that young person from Flint, Michigan, who grew up there and always wanted to make a difference. So, I stay humble and am sure to be true to who I am as an individual. That helps guide me and keep me focused.