

## VIRGINIA A. CAINE, MD '76

## Public Health Crusader

During a time when black women were not very present in the health care industry, Virginia A. Caine, MD '76, saw a path.

"My uncle was a physician in Arkansas and my father was the pre-med advisor at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff," Dr. Caine says. "I also had a number of cousins who were physicians, pharmacists, and dentists, so a lot of discussions around the table revolved around health care when I was growing up."

For Caine, working in the sciences felt like a clear next step. She knew it was possible because she saw it within her family. Still, that type of representation didn't exist outside of her family. It still doesn't. A 2015 study from the American Hospital Association's Institute for Diversity and Health Equity found that just 11 percent of minorities make up executive leadership across the health care industry, even though a third of patients being served in various clinics and hospitals are minorities.

During her years of medical training, Caine didn't let the lack of women and people of color deter her. As an undergraduate student, she spent a summer at Harvard University's School of Medicine, where she worked alongside a doctor and learned about treating infectious diseases. She left Massachusetts that summer knowing she wanted to work with patients and help treat their diseases.

While in medical school at SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, she got the opportunity to work with infectious disease specialist King Holmes, MD, PhD, who became her mentor.

"He is world renowned for his work with sexually transmitted diseases," Caine said. "It was under him that I learned about the Tuskegee Airmen being injected with syphilis. That affected those men and their families for generations and it made me want to do something about it because that's how I was raised. When we see injustice happening, we don't stay silent," she says.

Caine also noticed how prevalently STDs affected teenagers and young adults. Knowing that many of these diseases were preventable,

she threw herself into the work.

After medical school, Caine did her residency in internal medicine at the University of Cincinnati and trained in infectious disease at the University of Washington in Seattle. After completing her training, she went to work at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, Maryland, where she served as a research epidemiologist studying HIV/AIDS. In the late 1980s she got an offer to bring her research to Indianapolis in a joint position between Indiana University and the Marion County Department of Health (MCDH). She took the offer and became the director of the STD program at MCDH.

Thirty years later, she's now the director of MCDH and last year was named Bicentennial Professor at the Indiana University School of Medicine. During her tenure, she established the first countywide HIV/AIDS integrated health care delivery system involving major hospitals, community health centers, and social service agencies, as well as the first HIV dental clinic. She also created the first nationwide AIDS physician education program for the National Medical Association, a program later duplicated by the American Medical Association. Additionally, Caine served as the co-director for the Indianapolis Healthy Babies Initiative, working with community leaders to decrease the black infant mortality rate to its lowest level ever.

In 2004, Caine was elected president of the American Public Health Association, the oldest and largest organization of public health professionals in the world. She has also served as an Expert Panel Member for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in drafting their treatment guidelines for sexually transmitted diseases and served as an advisor to the National Institute of Health on AIDS clinical treatment guidelines.

Among numerous accolades, Caine has been honored for her work in public health by the National Medical Association, which named her Practitioner of the Year in 2010, and by BioCrossroads, a statewide initiative to advance and invest in life sciences, which named Caine the Life Sciences Champion of the year



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in 2017. In April, she received the 2019 Gerald L. Bepko Community Medallion from Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, in honor of her 30-plus years of exemplary application of research to critical public health problems.

Caine says she owes her success to mentors who believed in her as well as her belief in herself.

"You really need to know who you are, what your values are, and what your commitment is," she says. "Don't let someone else tell you who you are. Follow your dreams, follow your aspirations, and don't be afraid to ask for help along the way."  
—Brittany King

*Adapted with permission from the Indianapolis Recorder*