

"He crowded into a handful of years a significance so great that men will never forget it"

By Lenore Robbins Drew

# Unforgettable Charlie Drew

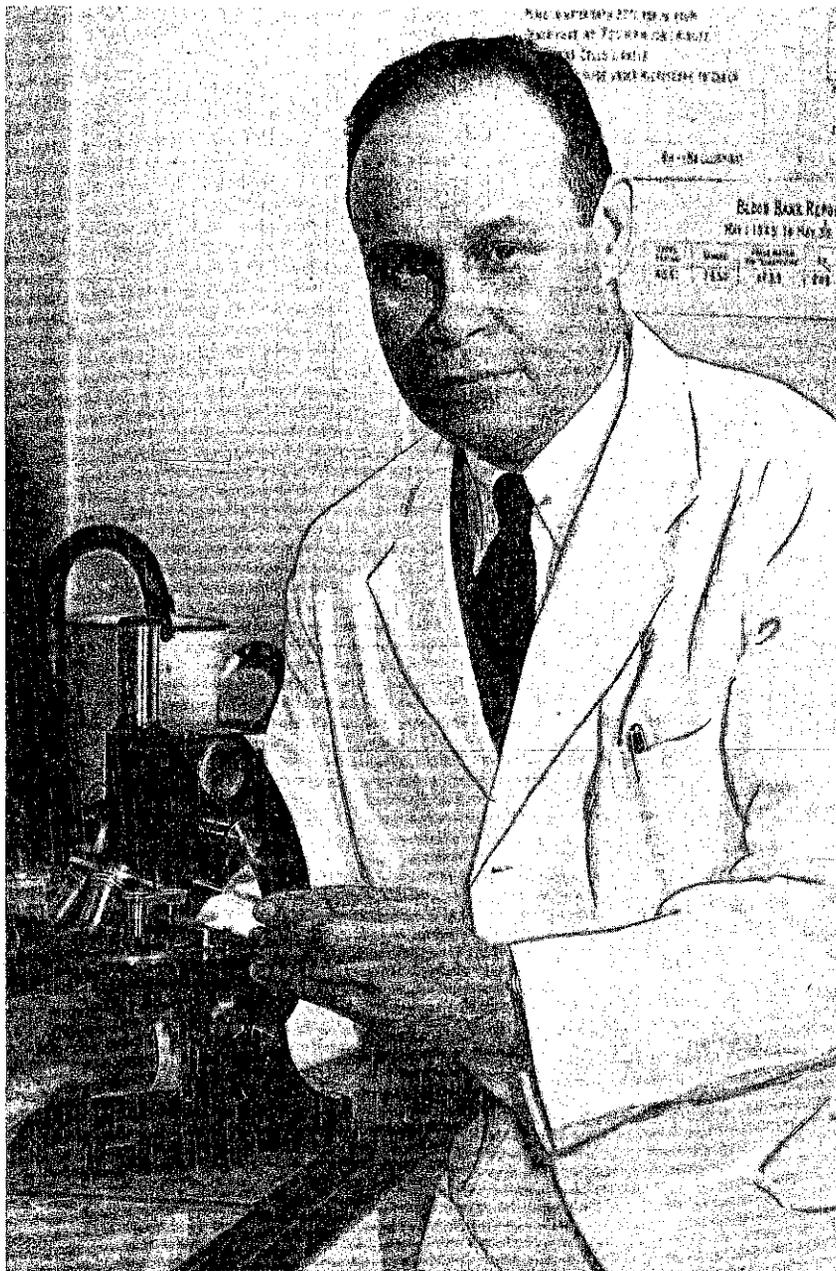
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"**D**ream high," he exhorted his students. "Dream high enough and work hard enough and we'll all get where we want to go!" A naively idealistic formula, but when Charlie Drew repeated it in his soft voice, his medical students—and, eventually, millions of other American blacks—listened. By the time he died in 1950, my husband had become a leader—and a toppler of racial barriers—in at least three major fields.

But it was his remarkable career in the science of blood preservation that made him known to the world. At a Bicentennial celebration on September 9, 1976, a painting of Charlie became the first portrait of a black man ever to be hung in the National Institutes of Health, at Bethesda, Md. At the ceremony,



Mrs. Lenore Robbins Drew



Dr. Charles R. Drew (Photo by Scurlock Studio)

the Institutes' director, Dr. Donald S. Fredrickson, reminded a new generation that it was Charles Drew whose pioneering work in World War II "laid the foundation for today's vast blood program of the American Red Cross."

Charlie came into my life at a supper party in Atlanta on an April evening in 1939. Then 28, I was a home economics teacher at Spelman College. Dr. Drew, 34, was passing through the city on his way to a medical convention at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

The moment I saw him I knew he was a man to be reckoned with. He seemed to be from another—a more old-fashioned and courtly—time and place. He listened with

fatherly interest to the hopes and problems that some of us teachers poured out to him. "Just keep dreaming high," he told us, "and we'll make the kind of world we want."

Three nights later, on his way back north, he roused the matron of our dormitory at one o'clock in the morning and insisted that she wake me. I went down to meet Dr. Drew on the moonlit campus. He proposed to me then and there. Six months later, we married and began our life together in New York City.

"**Doing and Showing.**" Charles Richard Drew was born June 3, 1904, in Foggy Bottom, one of the shabbier sections of Washington, D.C. Quickly developing a power-

ful, athletic body, he starred in four sports at Washington's Dunbar High School. He then landed an athletic scholarship—and a part-time job waiting on tables—at prestigious Amherst College, in Massachusetts, where he was soon leading the football team to a series of lopsided victories.

But a great many people were not yet ready for black stars in a white world, and he met with racial slurs both on and off the field. The insults made him flush the dangerous, dark-red color that earned him the nickname "Big Red." He controlled his temper, though, for he had already decided that our people—any people—could make more real progress by "doing and showing" than by any amount of violent "demonstration."

In his senior year he was elected captain of the Amherst track team and that summer won the National Junior A.A.U. championship in the 120-yard hurdles. At graduation, when time came to award the Mossman Trophy to the student who had brought most honor to the school in athletics, he got that, too.

Charlie's record as a medical student was equally impressive. Entering McGill University, in Montreal, he chalked up the second-highest

scholastic rating in his class. After obtaining his M.D. and Masters degree in surgery from McGill in 1933, he spent two years in a rotating internship and one year in residency at Montreal General Hospital.

**A Time for Sprinters.** Such was the impressive past of the man I had married. When I began to share his life in New York in September 1939, I was astonished to find him holding down three enormous jobs. Acting as an assistant resident surgeon at Presbyterian Hospital, he was tied to a heavy operating schedule. On a grant from one of the Rockefeller philanthropies, he was completing his Doctor of Medical Science degree. And, as a member of a special research team headed by Presbyterian's Dr. John Scudder, he was involved in an intensive two-year study of blood.

"But you can't do all these things at once!" I protested. "You've got to slow down!"

Charlie grinned and said, "I'm a sprinter, Lenore, remember?"

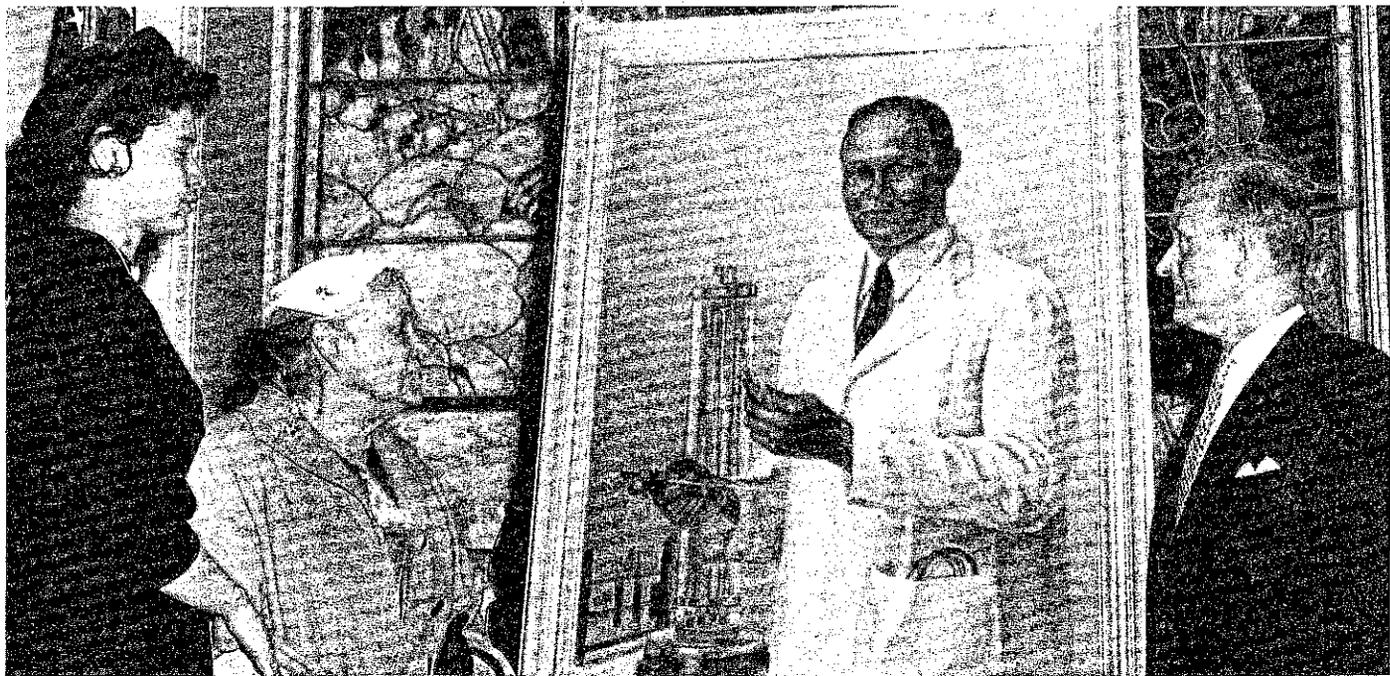
To squeak by on his income of less than \$100 a month, we shared an apartment with another couple. Although he somehow managed to look neat, his only two suits were cheap and shiny in spots, and his

shoes, while always polished, were cracked with wear.

But the times were ripe for sprinters in Charlie's field, experts on blood who could do things fast and well. World War II, with its ghastly casualties, was spreading apace, and there was a desperate need to get huge amounts of blood to the masses of wounded. Although the science of blood banking was still brand new, a breakthrough began when Dr. Scudder and Charlie created an experimental bank at Presbyterian Hospital. For nearly ten years, Charlie had been quietly pulling together all the existing but scattered research done in the world on blood collection and storage. Now he set out to determine which theories would work in actual practice.

**Plasma Miracle.** I would have seen little of my beleaguered mate in those days if I hadn't become one of his volunteer lab assistants. This allowed me to be with him day and night—and to see medical history made. I saw stricter standards of sterility set up, and I saw the dramatic results of this improvement on patients at Presbyterian.

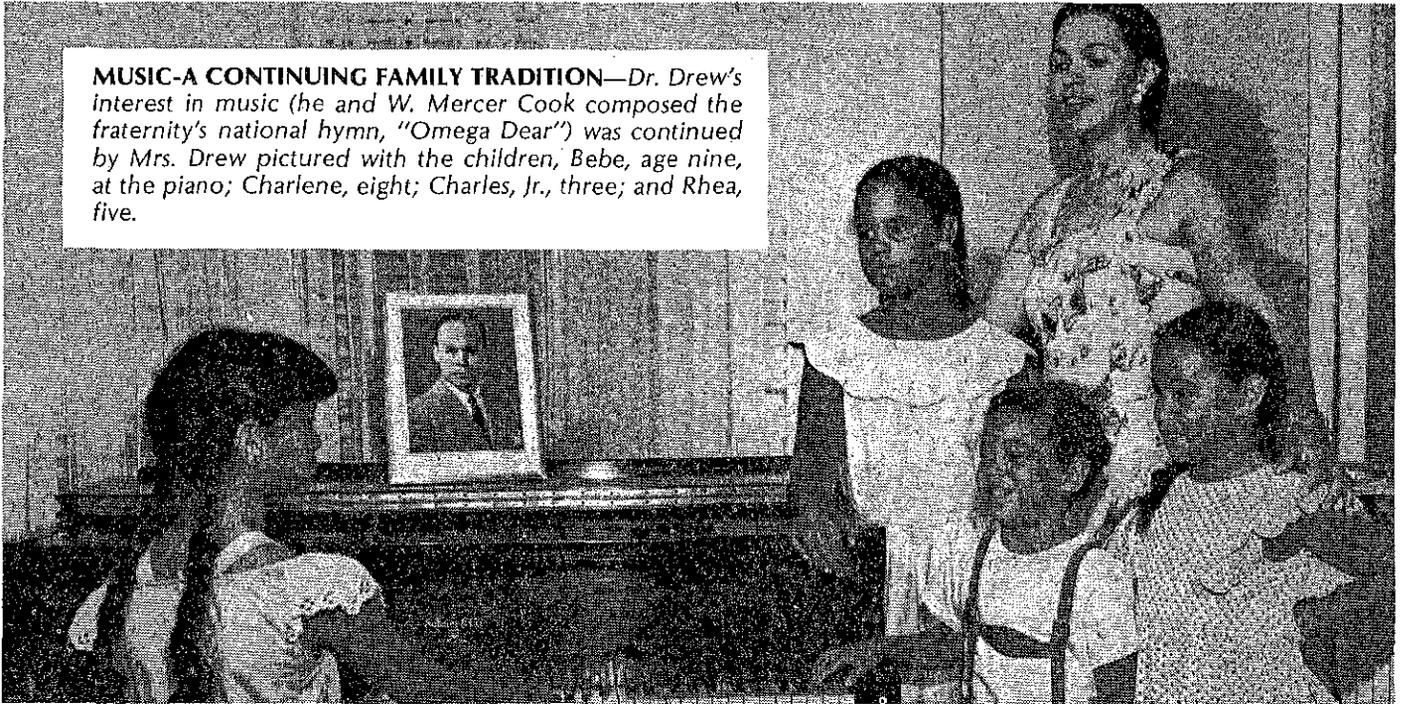
I saw failure, too. When blood was refrigerated, the plasma remained fresh, but the red cells



**RED CROSS UNVEILS PORTRAIT**—A portrait of Dr. Charles R. Drew is unveiled in the presence of members of the Drew family by Maj. Gen. Alfred M. Gruenther, U.S.A., retired, president of the American Red Cross. The painting by Betsy Graves Reyneau was hung in the American Red Cross national headquarters, 2025 E Street, NW, Washington, DC. The ceremony marked the naming of the District of Columbia

Red Cross Blood Donor Center as the Dr. Charles R. Drew Blood Donor Center. At the formal dedication, Dr. Drew was memorialized in these words: "Dedicated to the memory of an eminent physician, educator and pioneer in blood research. His brilliant contributions have benefitted the American Red Cross Blood Program, the people of this nation and the world. We are forever in his debt."

**MUSIC-A CONTINUING FAMILY TRADITION**—Dr. Drew's interest in music (he and W. Mercer Cook composed the fraternity's national hymn, "Omega Dear") was continued by Mrs. Drew pictured with the children, Bebe, age nine, at the piano; Charlene, eight; Charles, Jr., three; and Rhea, five.



spoiled in about a week. Although Charlie and the other researchers devised ways to arrest the spoiling process, Charlie still had to advise against using stored blood after a week or so—an interval too short to help the war-wounded.

Then he asked himself a key question: Why use "whole blood" at all for transfusions? Why not extract the trouble-making red cells and use only the plasma? (Hematologists had been proposing this idea since the 1920s, but it had never been tested in any conclusive way.)

But did plasma alone contain enough of blood's wondrous ingredients to save lives on its own? With help from the team, Charlie demonstrated that it did; and furthermore, that in many cases of violent injury and shock, plasma was actually *preferable* to the more troublesome and risky whole blood. Plasma could be stockpiled for months, unrefrigerated, without spoiling. And it could be administered to patients instantly without having to worry about blood-typing or cross-matching.

By September 1940, with the terrible bombing of Britain under way, England was urgently pleading for blood. In response, the United States launched the "Plasma for Britain Project," with Charlie as medical supervisor. In five brief months, from September 1940 to the following January (when the English were able to set up their own blood bank), he supervised the successful

collection of 14,500 pints of vital plasma for Britain.

By now it was clear that America might soon be drawn into the war, and the armed forces asked the Red Cross to work out a system that would eventually be capable of stockpiling *millions* of pints of plasma. As medical supervisor of the project, Charlie got this job done, too; the pilot program he set up later became the model for the national volunteer blood donor program of the American Red Cross. Through Charlie's efforts, collection stations were established throughout the country, and plasma was distributed to all points of the globe where it might be needed by American fighting men. Result: When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, adequate plasma was on hand. And of every 100 wounded men who were given transfusions with it, 96 recovered.

**No Apology.** Charlie completed his task in time to save thousands of lives in World War II. But before the first bombs rained on Pearl, he was no longer medical supervisor of the blood program—for an ironic reason. By order of the armed forces, the Red Cross had adopted a policy under which only Caucasian blood would be acceptable for later administration to members of the military forces.

Charlie couldn't sit still for this affront both to his race and to science. Calling a press conference, he told reporters: "The blood of indi-

vidual human beings may differ by groupings, but there is absolutely no scientific basis to indicate any difference according to race." He subsequently resigned from the Red Cross to become professor of surgery and medical director of Freedmen's Hospital at the predominantly black Howard University Medical School in Washington, D.C. *Thank goodness, I thought. Now we'll settle down to normal.*

What a silly notion! For Charlie now began his third major career, creating for America a new and better-trained group of black surgeons. (At that time, Negroes were admitted to a mere fraction of the 77 medical schools in the country. And only a handful had ever been certified as surgeons.)

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**A HAPPY MOMENT AT HOME**—Dr. Drew cherishing a few moments with his son, Charles, Jr.

## Charlie Drew from page 9

"From now on," Big Red Drew announced to his classes, "we're going to turn out surgeons here who will not have to apologize to anybody, anywhere!"

His students believed him. They could see he was not asking them to attempt any hurdles he had not already cleared himself, for Charlie had begun to "arrive" in a big way. In 1944, he was awarded—for his work with plasma—the NAACP's Spingarn Medal for the highest achievement by an American Negro. In 1947, Amherst College presented him an honorary Doctor of Science degree. Later, monuments to him would spring up from one side of the nation to the other, including at least ten public schools bearing his name, a medical center in California and a park in New York City.

**Last Good-By.** But for Charlie himself the most satisfying moment of his professional life came, I'm sure, on a December afternoon in 1948. He had sent his first graduate students up to Johns Hopkins, in Baltimore, to take their exams for certification by the American Board of Surgery (A.B.S.), and he had never been more anxious about anything.

Some people talk things out when they're worried. Not Charlie. He went down to the basement and, with a sledgehammer, began knocking to pieces an enormous old coal bin that had been cluttering up the place for years.

"Your boys will do all right," I tried to console him.

"All right won't be good enough," he said. "They're up there at Hopkins competing with graduates of the top medical schools... with *rich boys*, Lenore, boys who've had every advantage."

I went back upstairs. An hour passed, and the booming of his hammer grew louder. Finally, the phone rang.

"That was President Mordecai Johnson over at Howard calling," I told Charlie. "He's just heard from Hopkins and he said to tell you one of your boys taking the examination came in second."

"Second!" Charlie threw down his hammer and let out a whoop.

"But that's not all," I went on. "He said to tell you another one of your boys came in *first!*"

## Goal For His Medical Students and Associates Excellence—"No Apologies to Anyone, Anywhere"

### "All Right, Not Good Enough"— Be First of All!

Charlie dropped into a chair. "First," he said unbelievably. "First out of all those students from all over?" Tears filled his eyes—they'd already filled mine—and his voice dropped to a whisper. "First and second. Well, what do you know about that?"

During the nine years Charlie taught at Howard, more than half of the nation's black surgeons to receive A.B.S. certification studied directly under him, and today more than a score of Charlie's "boys" are tops in their various specialized fields. Better yet, doors once closed are now open, with the result that hundreds of black surgeons have been certified by the A.B.S.

Naturally, I gave up expecting that Charlie would ever "settle down to normal." Although he loved his home life with me and our four children, it was a luxury he seldom had time to enjoy. For this sprinter there was always another race to run, another hurdle to clear. I said a last good-by to him in the pre-dawn hours of April 1, 1950. After an exhausting day at the hospital, an evening of speaking at a banquet, and less than two hours' sleep, he was leaving to drive to Tuskegee, Ala., to attend a conference there.

He never made it. Near Burlington, N.C., he napped at the wheel for a moment. The car went off the road and turned over, and Charlie was crushed. Rushed to a neighboring hospital, he was too gravely

### Distinguished Students



Dr. Merle B. Herriford



Dr. C. Waldo Scott



Dr. LaSalle D. Leffall



Dr. Oswald W. Hoffler



Dr. Mitchell Spellman



Dr. Charles D. Watts



Dr. Jack White



Dr. Asa G. Yancey

hurt to be saved. He died two months shy of his 46th birthday.

Speaking at the funeral, Howard's President Johnson said, "Here we have what rarely happens in history—a life which crowds into a handful of years significance so great that men will never be able to forget it."

### Eulogy from a Distinguished Surgeon Matt Walker, Sr.

Not often in the life of an institution has such a valuable man as Dr. Charles Drew met such an untimely death in the height of his career. The Surgical Department here at Meharry is deeply grieved over the passing of this outstanding surgeon, scientist, and educator. And we can well understand how deeply you, his family and others feel at this loss. As another evidence of his farsightedness and greatness of his work he has trained a group of efficient men around him which will assure Howard University the same high calibre of surgery to which it has been accustomed, although I must admit that nobody can take the place of Charlie Drew. He was loyal to the administration, interested in the development of men and interested in all problems regarding our race; however, his greatness was not limited to our race. It so happens that he was my personal friend and I am most deeply grieved. For the rest of my life I will be urged on by the great spirit of Charlie Drew who died enroute to give service as he lived giving service."