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Nominee puts Alabama town on the map

by Alice Popovici



U.S. President Barack Obama announces that Dr. Regina Benjamin, center, will be the new U.S. surgeon general in the Rose Garden at the White House in Washington July 13. At right is Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius. CNS/Reuters/Larry Downing)

Ask around in Bayou La Batre, Ala., and it will not take long to find someone who knows Dr. Regina Benjamin or has been a patient at the local clinic she founded. "She's helped a lot of people around here?" is the common refrain.

So small is the shrimping village near the Gulf of Mexico -- about 2,700 residents, according to most recent United States Census estimates -- that news of Benjamin's July 13 nomination to the post of surgeon general spread quickly even to residents who did not have a chance to tune in to the news.

"Nice person," said John Sprinkle, a local shrimper reached by phone at Murdock's Market, where he works. He added that he learned of the nomination from another resident. Though Sprinkle said he does not know Benjamin personally, he has heard good things about her in town, and believes the community -- hit hard by the economy and devastated by recent hurricanes -- stands to benefit if she is confirmed.

Benjamin has been asked by the Obama administration to withhold comments until Senate confirmation hearings are completed, and calls to staff members at the Bayou La Batre Rural Health Clinic were referred to the Department of Health and Human Services.

But others around town took the time to talk about the Regina Benjamin they know.

"When the water was knee-deep high, she was knee-deep in water," said Mayor Stan Wright, a longtime friend of Benjamin, speaking recently from Wright Brand Oysters, a business he runs in town. "She's had time to understand and realize what actual people need -- Regina may come from a small community, but she's got a big enough heart for the whole country."

He said he admires Benjamin and believes she is the right person for the job, particularly because of her work caring for Bayou La Batre's poor, working community, which includes blacks, Hispanics and South Asians. If a patient cannot afford the medical bill, she will accept payment in oysters, he said. If someone is homebound, "she'll grab her little black bag" and visit them at home.

Benjamin, who is a Catholic and, according to several reports, serves as lector at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Mobile, Ala., has recently come under scrutiny in regard to her position on abortion, which remains unclear. Although a few pro-life Web sites have speculated that Benjamin is pro-choice -- based on a comment by a White House spokesman, who reportedly said her position on "reproductive health issues" aligns with the president's -- *The Washington Post* reported that the White House would not say "whether Benjamin supports a woman's right to an abortion, but sources close to her selection say she does."

Though Benjamin's biography lists numerous accolades and recognition, including the MacArthur Genius Award, the Nelson Mandela Award for Health and Human Rights and the papal honor Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice from Pope Benedict XVI, perhaps she is best known for her work at the Bayou La Batre Rural Health Clinic, which she started in 1990 and has rebuilt repeatedly after it was devastated by hurricanes and fire.

Benjamin, 52, grew up in Daphne, Ala., received her bachelor's degree from Xavier University in New Orleans, attended Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta, and holds a medical degree from the University of Alabama at Birmingham and a master of business administration from Tulane University in New Orleans. Her subsequent work in health care includes having served as president of the State of Alabama Medical Association and associate dean for rural health at the University of South Alabama's College of Medicine, according to her biography on the MacArthur Foundation Web site.

"I've just been amazed at her career," said Carol Smith, 62, who taught Benjamin in her 10th-grade biology class at Fairhope High School in Alabama in the 1970s. The retired teacher said she has kept up with her former student's accomplishments over the years, and doesn't know of "anybody who would be better qualified" to serve as surgeon general.

Smith said she remembers Benjamin as a hard-working, excellent student who was always prepared for class.

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"She was well-spoken, she expressed her opinions well," Smith said, adding that she continues to be

impressed by Benjamin's devotion to her patients.

"Something makes me think that she has completely sacrificed a private [life], and rather than striving for the material possessions that are the goal of so many people entering medical careers, Benjamin has focused on helping others, Smith said.

In her remarks following the announcement of her nomination by President Obama, Benjamin spoke about the challenges faced by millions of Americans who live in underserved areas and cannot afford "basic health services," underscoring the importance of better preventive care.

"My family is not here today, at least not in person, because of preventable diseases," Benjamin said, remembering her father, who died of diabetes and hypertension, her brother, who died of an HIV-related illness, and her mother, who died of lung cancer. And while she cannot change her family's past, she said, "I can be a voice in the movement to improve our nation's health care and our nation's health for the future."

Benjamin is a member of the board of trustees of the Catholic Health Association, an organization that has applauded her nomination.

"Dr. Benjamin will enrich the nation because she brings competence and integrity to this very important role," association president and CEO Sr. Carol Keehan said in a statement. "Our nation will greatly benefit from her leadership and her background in national and international efforts to deliver quality health care."

Asked about her own views on health care reform, Bayou La Batre resident Monica Taylor, a nurse at the Mostellar Medical Center and parish council president at St. Margaret Catholic Church, said she hopes the system changes to incorporate better preventive care. She said there was a good deal of excitement in town following news of the nomination, and is glad that Benjamin has "put us on the map."

Eula Stork, 70, a former Bayou La Batre resident who now lives in a neighboring community, said she is proud to count herself among Benjamin's friends, and sends the doctor a card after each achievement or commendation. They met in the 1990s, when Benjamin treated one of Stork's family members.

"I saw a very caring person and someone who cared for you as a person and not just a patient, a number," she said. "She has that human touch that it takes to be a good doctor."

Stork said the Bayou La Batre Rural Health Clinic has been "a lifesaver" to the people in the community, describing Benjamin's efforts to rebuild the facility after it was devastated by two hurricanes. "A lot of people would have just given up."

That determination is part of the reason Stork said she believes there is no one more deserving of the country's highest health care position.

She said she would often tell Benjamin, in jest, that "one of these days, we're going to pick up the paper and there you are -- surgeon general."

Alice Popovici is an NCR contributor who writes from the Washington area.

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