

Industrialist Howard Hughes played a major role in establishment of the School of Medicine

The story of the establishment of the University of Nevada School of Medicine cannot be properly told without a discussion of the role industrialist Howard Hughes played in bringing medical education to Nevada.

The 1960s were a time of growth in Nevada, albeit not as formidable as the recent expansion of this decade. The influx of people streaming into the state demanded services, including those from medical professionals and specifically, physicians.

In 1964, the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education asked for an in-depth study on the feasibility of establishing medical schools in western states with small populations. That report showed Nevada in desperate need of a medical education institution and recommended that a school be established in Nevada by the early 1970s.

University President N. Edd Miller, who led the Nevada campus from 1965 to 1973 during a time of turbulence and controversy, worked tirelessly to establish a public medical school in Nevada. He collaborated with key external

supporters including

Dr. Fred Anderson and H. Edward Manville to develop public and private support for what was then a controversial endeavor.

From the outset, Dr.

George Smith, who became the founding dean of the University of Nevada School of Medicine, and his band of medical school proponents, including then-Governor Paul Laxalt, met with opposition to the school from several fronts including rural versus urban concerns and north-south political rivalries.

Laxalt, who was elected governor in 1966, remembers the political and social climate of those days. During his time campaigning in small towns, the primary concern was almost



Governor Paul Laxalt signs Assembly Bill 130 on March 25, 1969, creating a two-year medical school. L-R: Procter Hug Jr. '53, member of the Board of Regents (later to become Chief Justice of the U. S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals); Dr. William O'Brien; Assemblyman Bart Schouweiler; Dr. George Smith, first dean of the medical school; University President N. Edd Miller; state Senator James Slattery; Governor Paul Laxalt; state Senator Cliff Young (later to become the chief justice of the Nevada Supreme Court); Assembly Speaker Howard McKissick Jr.'50; Assemblyman Doug Webb; Assemblyman C. W. "Corky" Lingenfelter '52; Procter Hug Sr. '27, '44M.A., superintendent of Sparks Schools and the Washoe County School District; Neil Humphrey, chancellor of the University and Community College System of Nevada; Assemblyman Grover Swallow.

always a lack of physicians in rural communities. Nevada, especially southern Nevada, was growing rapidly even then, and the shortage of doctors was being felt statewide. Yet geographic and political challenges still stood in the way of the medical school.

In excerpts from his book *Nevada's Paul Laxalt: A Memoir*, the former governor recalled:

"After my election as governor, we decided to make the establishment of a medical school for Nevada a priority. I felt that 'selling' a medical school was going to be difficult, at best. I believed we should attempt to 'depoliticize it.' For me to be the 'point person' might cost us valuable support on a purely partisan basis ..."

"Of all the objections, the north-south rivalry was the most difficult politically. Historically, northern Nevada had received the

bulk of state funding. Now, the Las Vegas area was 'feeling its oats ...'"

"The North contended that the University in Reno already had in place many of the programs necessary for 'pre-med' training ..."

"Finally ... a select committee (was appointed) to do a feasibility study for the Board of Regents. Respected doctors such as Dr. Fred Andersen, who in time became known as the 'Father of the Medical School,' along with Drs. Ernie Mack, Bill O'Brien and Dave Roberts, agreed to serve ..."

"Dr. Wes Hall traveled the state soliciting support. Dr. George Smith, later to become dean of the medical school, effectively lobbied individual legislators."

Yet, in spite of all these efforts, the votes were still not there in the legislature.

Anne McMillin, APR, is the public relations manager for the School of Medicine.



Howard Hughes standing beside his H-1 Racer, 1935.

Enter Hughes, whom both Smith and Laxalt credit with providing the financial contribution that helped tip the legislative voting in favor of establishing a medical school for Nevada.

"In February 1969, five of us decided to buy an ad in the *Las Vegas Sun* in support of the medical school in Reno as there were no university or graduate programs in Las Vegas at that time," recalls Smith. That ad was the trigger that apparently caught Hughes' attention.

Laxalt's memoir continues:

"Fortunately, it (the ad) caught the eye of Howard Hughes. He called me and said he'd been following the medical school fight and wanted to help, but was concerned lest his intervention would 'screw things up.' I assured him that in my judgment his offer would help greatly. The next day, I received his telegram in which he pledged to give between \$200,000 and \$300,000 a year for 20 years. The logjam was broken."

Later, Laxalt remembered being "pleasantly surprised" by Hughes' offer which was "one hell of a lot of money at that time."

"The value of the Hughes factor aside from

the hard money was that his association lent great impetus to anything we did," says Laxalt, who personally considered Hughes a very decent man. "It changed the momentum of the whole effort and permitted us to take the next step and go to the legislature."

Finalizing negotiations took place and on March 26, 1969, Laxalt signed legislation to establish the "School of Medical Sciences," in Reno as the state's first and only medical school for the 35 years to follow.

"I talked to Mr. Hughes directly one time after he gave the commitment," Smith remembers. "I went to his penthouse in Las Vegas and talked to him through a window to thank him."

Smith says the school received the first several years of the gift commitment from Hughes before he died in 1976. Those funds paid faculty salaries in the early years of the medical school.

"We sincerely appreciated the money Mr. Hughes so graciously gave as it was a win-win for everyone," Smith says.

"In my experience as a public official, I don't know anyone who has contributed more to

Nevada than Howard Hughes," Laxalt adds.

Dr. Owen Peck, emeritus executive associate dean who served the first six deans of the School of Medicine, arrived at the medical school in 1972 and was responsible for collecting Hughes' donation each year.

"There were no written contracts with Howard Hughes, but he always followed through with his promise. His Las Vegas lawyer would hand me the check at a hotel," Peck says, adding that without Hughes' contributions "the medical school wouldn't be here." He felt so strongly on this point that he lobbied to have the institution named the Howard Hughes School of Medicine.

A full-length Robert Tanenbaum portrait of Hughes now hangs in the entryway between the Savitt and Manville buildings on the Reno campus. The accompanying plaque reads "In grateful appreciation to Howard R. Hughes for his vision and for his generous commitment to medical education and research, University of Nevada School of Medicine, October 26, 1987." ■