Governor, Colleagues Pay Tribute to Kenneth Edelin

MED prof was a healer, mentor, and a “warrior for justice”

By Susan Seligson

Kenneth Edelin’s former students, fellow medical faculty, and many who had joined him on the front lines of the ongoing battle for women’s reproductive freedoms and civil rights filled Marsh Chapel on January 25 for a memorial service—complete with a jazz trio playing Marvin Gaye. The service was orchestrated by the School of Medicine professor in the weeks before his death, at 74, from cancer on December 30, 2013.

Edelin’s was a life “uniquely, powerfully lived,” said Reverend Liz Walker, a former WBZ-TV news anchor, who officiated along with Marsh Chapel Dean Robert A. Hill.

Chairman of the MED department of obstetrics and gynecology from 1978 to 1989, Edelin went on to become MED associate dean for student and minority affairs. He had served as chairman of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and was a 30-year board member of the NAACP’s Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

“He was a warrior for women’s battle for justice,” said Governor Deval Patrick, describing Edelin as “a crusader against health disparities and a mentor to a generation of doctors.”

Amid the hundreds gathered to pay their respects was a group of young MED graduates who wore their red ties and white jackets as a show of respect for the man who “opened his home to all of us” and was “the epitome of a mentor, student advocate, and friend,” said Robert Rusher (MED’04), now a pulmonary specialist at Kaiser Permanente.

“We wear this white coat, and for most of us he was the sole reason.”

Edelin became the first African American chief OB/GYN resident at Boston City Hospital (now Boston Medical Center) in 1973, the year of the US Supreme Court’s landmark Roe v. Wade decision upholding a woman’s right to choose abortion. He was thrust into the national spotlight 15 months later during a high-profile Boston manslaughter trial in the death of a fetus during a legal abortion. He was convicted and sentenced to a year’s probation, but kept his medical license and was later exonerated.

The battle fortified his lifelong dedication to the fight for social and health care justice, a fight poignantly recounted in his 2008 memoir Broken Justice: A True Story of Race, Sex, and Revenge in a Boston Courtroom.

During Edelin’s years at MED, he was also managing director of the Roxbury Comprehensive Health Center. He “wasn’t just a doctor, he was a crusader, who devoted his entire life to women’s health,” said Cecile Richards, Planned Parenthood Federation president.

Richards shared a written tribute from Gloria Steinem, founder of Ms. magazine, which had covered Edelin’s Boston trial. “I had never met a better person or a worse injustice,” Steinem wrote. She recalled that Edelin, recipient of Planned Parenthood’s 2007 Margaret Sanger Award, whose 1966
MED’s Joel Alpert Dies at 83

Pediatrician remembered as strong advocate of primary care

By Leslie Friday

Joel Alpert loved the Yale Bulldogs, believed men should wear ties, hated smoking, and relished a good debate. But among his many passions, he most ardently supported the provision of quality primary care to the children and families he served as the one-time chief of pediatrics at Boston Medical Center (BMC).

Arriving at BMC (then Boston City Hospital) in 1972, Alpert, a School of Medicine professor and chair emeritus of pediatrics, “came into a challenging situation and basically, at a time when everyone was moving to subspecialty care, put the limelight on primary care pediatrics,” says Robert Vinci, MED’s Joel and Barbara Alpert Professor of Pediatrics and department chair and current BMC chief of pediatrics. “He turned around this institution. He led with strength, with vision, and he became one of the national figures in academic pediatrics.”

Alpert, who was also MED assistant dean for student affairs and a member of the Dean’s Advisory Board, died of leukemia on December 31, 2013, while in hospice care near his home in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla. He was 83.

During his four decades at MED and BMC, Alpert pioneered pediatric primary care training and the development of a curriculum that emphasized child development, advocacy, and community care. He held several leadership positions in major pediatric associations and earned numerous awards throughout his career. His writings, including The Education of Physicians for Primary Care in 1974, still define the practice today.

“Joel Alpert was a recognized leader in pediatric care and...”