

Dr. W. Ralieg Thompson to retire after 59 years

Renowned physician worked at Orange Park Hospital since Day 1

By Kyla Woodard
For Clay Today

ORANGE PARK — From a young age, Dr. W. Raleigh Thompson Jr. knew that being at the front lines of care was his calling.

"It gave me an opportunity to take care of people. And, to take care of families," Thompson said.

As a Family Care Specialist, Thompson has spent 59 years in family medicine and 57 years bringing care to families in Orange Park. Throughout his career, Thompson has worked to satisfy medical needs varying in gynecology, geriatrics and general medicine, delivering 300 babies during his long career.

But he will soon take off his white coat for good.

In October, Thompson will retire from his long-time position, leaving a lasting impact on the community. His genuine smile and acknowledgment that the patients he once appreciated will be a huge missing piece in the lives of many.

Born and reared in Jacksonville, Thompson spent the beginning of his life living along the St. Johns River. Growing up in the rural part of town, Thompson

attended Landon High. Thompson said he spent his free time raising farm animals, like pigs and chickens, and driving a milk tanker.

After finishing college at Emory University, Thompson enlisted in the U.S. Navy during the peak of the Cold War. For six years working as an officer and a navigator, the experience further shaped his need to help others.

"Of course, when you spend three years preparing to drop a nuclear bomb on your enemy, you think a lot about ... people. And, I think that was the prime drive," Thompson said.

He continued his journey of helping others by enrolling in Emory's School of Medicine. In 1966, after finishing his studies, Thompson returned to his hometown to intern at Duval Medical Center.

Thompson said he returned to Orange Park because of the small community and slightly rural atmosphere. From the oak trees hanging in the then-narrow roads to the quiet environment, Thompson said it seemed like the right place to practice saving lives.

And, with his return to Orange Park, significant changes came with it.



Dr. W. Raleigh Thompson was one of the first four doctors to treat patients at what's now called HCA Florida Orange Park Hospital. After 59 years, he leaves a legacy that will live embraced for generations to come.



Opening his private medical practice in 1968, Park Medical Center became a place to receive general family care. With no advertising for the center's opening, Thompson and his nurses provided care for 44 patients on the first day.

However, Thompson said there were no public hospitals in the area.

With the closest hospitals in Green Cove Springs and Jacksonville, he said it became necessary to find a better way to filter the heavy crowds of patients that flocked to the private center.

And with that, Thompson and three oth-

er doctors dedicated their time to making that happen.

"We were sending so many people to the Jacksonville hospital that we needed a hospital in Orange Park. So, Dr. Hinson Stephens, Dr. Tom Hardin and myself got together and started trying to put together a hospital," he said.

From the ground up, Thompson, along with Dr. Hinson Stephens and Dr. Thomas Hardin, worked to oversee the establishment of the first hospital in the town.

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Meeting three nights a week for about three years, the three doctors cultivated a plan forever to change the trajectory of medical care in Clay County.

"That's a lot bigger project than you really realize. But, we did manage to do it and got all the stuff going," Thompson said.

Initially, Thompson said their venture got a lot of pushback. Many believed the building of a new hospital would interfere with neighboring ones. But weathering through the frustration, the group of men finally contacted a legal team that helped them move forward. And a new hospital was born.

The Orange Park Community Hospital, now known as HCA Florida Orange Park Hospital, opened its doors 1974. The hospital quickly became successful, with Thompson obtaining the title of Chief of Staff twice.

Dr. Mohamed Antar, a urologist and former colleague, said he could remember Dr. Thompson's support when he first joined the team. Thompson was the first person he spoke to regarding coming to work in Orange Park.

"I told him about my intention to come here and work, and he was very encouraging. He said, 'Absolutely. You're more than welcome. We will help you get started [and] send you patients,'" Antar said.

Antar said he later went on to admit the first patient to the hospital. Tending to patients around Orange Park, Thompson said it became the highlight of his life.

"I think the most rewarding thing about being in the practice is the relationship you build with patients," Thompson said.

Thompson recalled a time when an emergency vehicle arrived at his office and three of the four people working on the vehicle were babies he had delivered.

This closeness towards patients continues to play a role in his career.

In a personal letter to his patients announcing his retirement, Thompson wrote, "I have come to know many of my patients and their families as friends, and it has been an honor for you to trust me with your healthcare and life decisions."

Patient Charlie Osborne said that Thompson's retirement will be a true loss to not just him but his entire family.

Osborne said his 50-year close bond with Thompson is something he will always

cherish. The two are next-door neighbors. Osborne said Thompson was just as much his doctor as his friend. He said his retirement would be a difficult gap to close.

"The thing I'll probably miss most about him is we have to get another doctor. We don't know anybody, but we're now looking for another doctor. Everybody's got to have a doctor. He was just a real good doctor as well as a friend," Osborne said.

Thompson's dedication to caring for others was not limited to his patients. Thompson said he always tried his best to help any young doctor who came into town. His support was something that resonated with many in the field. A rheumatologist and former colleague, Dr. Meera Oza said she remembered beginning her practice with no backing. She said Thompson was a beacon of light to her burgeoning career.

"He told all of the citizens how good Dr. Oza is. And that's the way my practice picked up. I started seeing, by March, 10 patients a day. By May, 15 patients a day," Oza said.

Oza added she credits the support of her practice to Thompson's giving nature.

Fellow Family Care Specialist and colleague Dr. Mohammed Mendhi said that

he would miss Thompson's ability to acknowledge someone and what they're going through truly.

Mendhi said the two would frequently guide and share their respective experiences in the field, creating an irreplaceable camaraderie and bond.

"He always looks into your eyes when he is talking to [you]. We have great mutual respect, love, and friendship for each other," Mendhi said.

Thompson sold his private practice to Family Care Partners back in 2021 and knowing his retirement was around the corner, Thompson said he plans to spend more time with his wife and children and take the time to travel—something he rarely gets to do.

"I have nine children and 26 grandchildren. So, [there's] lots of soccer games, football games, and basketball games to watch," Thompson said.

In 59 years in the medical field, Thompson's achievements rank high. Thompson has witnessed everything from delivering babies, caring for patients and saving lives. But amid his farewell, Thompson said seven words, to sum up his incredible experience: "I enjoyed every single minute of it."

