

Dr. William H. Townsend

Dr. Townsend was born July 30, 1914, in West Point, Mississippi, but grew up on a farm in Earle, Arkansas. He was the oldest of eleven children. Unable to afford college after high school, he enlisted in U.S. Army during World War II. During his tour of duty, he studied at Nottingham University in England. After the war, he was a student at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture. He then studied pre-medicine at Howard University in Washington, D.C. One of his college professors there was an optometrist who encouraged him to enter the profession. He graduated from the Northern Illinois College of Optometry in 1950.

Later that year, Dr. Townsend opened an optometric clinic in Little Rock. He was the first African-American to be licensed to practice optometry in the state of Arkansas. His wife stated that before he began his practice, black residents had to go to places where they had to sort through pair after pair of glasses until they found one that they were able to see with. Dr. Townsend practiced in Little Rock for 50 years before retiring.

He was also an important figure in Arkansas history and politics. During the 1950s, he was one of the founding members of the Council of Human Relations and served as its president. This group was a catalyst in the desegregation of public schools and businesses in the state. Another organization, the Council on Community Affairs (COCA), helped facilitate the peaceful desegregation of public facilities in Little Rock. COCA was formed in 1961 by a group of black medical professionals, including Dr. Townsend. This group emerged from the events of the Freedom Riders protest of the segregation of interstate transit facilities in Arkansas. COCA successfully sued the city of Little Rock to gain access to all "public parks, recreational facilities, Joseph T. Robinson Auditorium, and all other public facilities." During the 1960s Dr. Townsend participated in sit-ins at restaurants that refused to serve blacks. "They went back every day until they got service," his wife said. "It was very important to him, because at the time our oldest daughter was in kindergarten."

In 1972, Dr. Townsend was elected to the Arkansas House of Representatives as one of the first African Americans to be elected since the 1890s. He served District 65 for twenty four years and was the author of a number of bills. He served as vice-chairman on the Education Committee and was the first African American to chair the Aging and Legislative Affairs Committee.

As a member of the legislature, Dr. Townsend consistently championed legislation to improve the visual welfare of the people of his state. As a member of the Arkansas Optometric Association, he served on the Board of Directors and was named Optometrist of the Year in 1981. Although he stood only 5 feet 3 inches tall, Dr. Townsend was a large figure in optometry in Arkansas. He died on September 15, 2005, at the age of 91.



For additional information about the Dr. William H. Townsend Scholarship, please contact:

Arkansas Optometric Association

411 S. Victory, Suite 206

Little Rock, AR 72201

(501) 661-7675 or FAX: (501) 372-0233

vicki@arkansasoptometric.org

One recipient will be selected from all applications. The winner will be announced in August.



Dr. William H. Townsend Scholarship

The Arkansas Optometric Association annually awards a \$1500 scholarship to one Arkansas optometry student attending an accredited college of optometry. This scholarship was established in memory of the late Dr. William H. Townsend, in recognition of his lifetime of service to the profession of optometry.



Information For Scholarship Applicants

The applicant must be:

- An Arkansas resident
- Attending an accredited college of optometry
- Entering 2nd, 3rd or 4th year of study
- In good academic standing
- A member of the Arkansas Optometric Student Association and the American Optometric Student Association

Submit the following information:

- Name
- Mailing address
- Permanent address
- E-mail address
- Phone number
- College of Optometry
- Year of graduation
- Cumulative GPA
- Extracurricular activities
- Hometown
- Undergraduate school and degree
- College financial aid contact information
- Essay

The essay should be between 200-500 words on the following topic:

“I believe that _____ will be most helpful to me in a professional optometric practice.”

The essay will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- Appropriate length
- Topic statement
- Critical thinking
- Organization
- Originality and creativity
- Grammar, punctuation, spelling and word choice.

All materials must be submitted by

May 1st

to

Vicki Farmer,

ArOA Executive Director

at

vicki@arkansasoptometric.org