

# Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: The Life of Dr. Richard L. Price

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**“Be a shoulder for all those younger than you. And at the moment when you cannot be a shoulder, give them a box to stand on.”**

**Dr. Richard Price has had a tremendous impact on many students throughout the ages. He has had a phenomenal leadership impact attracting and retaining the very best students in science, technology, engineering, and math.**



**Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: The Life of Dr. Richard L. Price**

*"If I have seen further than others, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants."*

*Isaac Newton.*

As I left my interview with Dr. Richard Price, I was more inspired to aid those less fortunate in reaching their dreams through education. It has always been my dream to found a school for orphans in Bangladesh. I am grateful for those before me who have allowed me to stand on their shoulders. Price demonstrated his indomitable spirit when he said "When you cannot be a shoulder, give them a box to stand on" (Price, Richard L. Speech.). My interview with mathematics teacher Dr. Price concluded with a hug and an exclamation of "Goodbye, Chile." My heart warmed to think that I could not have selected a more iconic person for the focus of my essay. My jubilation contrasted with my discouragement that prior week when after scouring the internet for a biography of Price, I found only an article listing his achievements, devoid of a description of his personal life including his date of birth. After my interview with Price, I found this representation to be sorely incomplete. I found him to be much more than a man of accomplishments; he is a man of character. Dr. Price epitomizes the power of education to set a person free of chains, to lift him above his circumstances.

Richard L. Price was born December 2, 1931 in Port Arthur, Texas (Price, Richard L. Personal), to Archie Lee and Cleona Price. The elder Price, a man of determination, persevered through poverty to attend Prairie View A&M University where he majored in physics. By 1931 he was a teacher at Hebert School in Pear Orchard, Beaumont's black community (Black). Eventually, he became principal of Hebert High School and minister at West Tabernacle Baptist Church. As the fifth son in a model family with twelve children, Price felt pressured to perform brilliantly, and he was not without the encouragement of his father and brothers. In my interview

with him, Price recalled that “the home, the church, religion, education, family involvement, community service” were all vital parts of his childhood. Price’s father took this to the next level. Price said, “My father for all his years dictated your school and your major.” Consequently, Price attended Morehouse to study mathematics after graduating salutatorian of his high school class of 1949. Even at Morehouse, Price’s brothers in keeping with the family tradition of guidance decided his class schedule. Unexpectedly, he was drafted into the army in 1951. Price recalled that “overnight I had to learn how to conduct myself as a man” (Price, Richard L. Personal).

Although Price served only thirteen months of combat duty, the Korean War had a profound impact on him (Alic). He solemnly told me, “I saw my share of action. I saw death. I saw wounded. I saw all that” (Price, Richard L. Personal). Before returning to the States, Price formulated a set of vows. He would never again sleep cold. He would get a good education, and more specifically, he would have his education complete before the age of forty. If he returned to the army, he would do so as an officer. If he lived past fifty, he would consider his “days beyond as lagniappe”, something extra. Lastly, he would mark his fiftieth birthday as something his family would always remember. With the exception of a return to the army, Price fulfilled all of his vows (Price, Richard L. Personal).

Upon his return to Beaumont, Price’s older brother and role model Al Price asked him about his plans for his future (Black). Price exclaimed, “Oh, I want to rest. I’m tired” (Price, Richard L. Personal). However, four days later at his father’s urging, Price enrolled in Prairie View to complete his mathematics degree. At Prairie View Price met his first wife Doris, who was a nursing student (Price, Richard L. Personal). That same year Professor W.P. Jones encouraged Price to apply to University of Texas Austin for a master’s degree in mathematics. The UT registrar rejected him, explaining that black students who could receive the same degree

at a traditionally black state institution were not accepted. Within weeks Price reapplied at the suggestion of Jones and was accepted because of the board of regents decision to accept graduate students based on merit rather than race (Price, Richard L. Speech.).

Price found that UT Austin differed greatly from Prairie View. In all of his classes, Price was the only student not a white male. Isolation permeated his social life as well. The university transported army barracks onto the campus to house the black students. Even the cafeteria was segregated. When Price dined, he sat alone because the white students refused to sit with him. Despite these discouragements, Price felt that UT was not all bad. While there, he met Professor Greenwood who took time to guide Price to professors who would receive and educate him. Therefore, most of Price's professors accepted him, and the prejudiced ones did not deter him as long as they taught well. In light of his gratitude to Greenwood, Price became advisor to the new black students who attended the following year (Price, Richard L. Personal). He graduated with a "master's degree in mathematics with a minor in philosophy" (Alic). He returned to Prairie View to marry Doris and to accept his first teaching assignment (Price).

Then in October 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, and a space race ensued. The National Science Foundation offered grants to those who would study mathematics, science, and engineering (Price, Richard L. Personal). Renewing his vow to be well-educated, Price "studied at Iowa State University, the University of California-Los Angeles, and Ohio State University" (Alic). At Ohio State, Price was given the liberty to select half of his classes for the first time in his education. Price relished both the opportunity and the school, eventually earning his Ph.D. at Ohio State (Price, Richard L. Personal). By 1970 Price received numerous job offers. Despite these wide spread opportunities, Price chose to return to his hometown of Beaumont; he accepted a position at Lamar University where Dean Lloyd Cherry gave him an office in the new

engineering building (Gallaspy).

Nearly forty, Price had one goal that he had yet to fulfill. All his life, he had observed and admired his active father who “went from one environment to another ... with the least amount of discontinuity, if any” (Price, Richard L. Personal). Price attributed this steadiness to religion and eagerly took a one-year leave of absence from Lamar to attend Yale Divinity School at the age of thirty-nine. With his formal education complete, Price determined to pursue all future education through the use of books (Price, Richard L. Personal).

Price profoundly influenced Lamar University. When he started at Lamar, “Price did not teach a single black student” (Gallaspy). Soon after returning to Lamar from Yale, Price began to serve the College of Engineering as the Director of Minority Recruitment and Retention. In time black students began to enroll in his classes (Gallaspy). To further the cause of black students at Lamar, Price approached Paul Fregia, an ambitious engineering student, about founding a Lamar chapter of the National Society of Black Engineers. For the remainder of his tenure, Price served as advisor to the organization (Cookin’). Additionally, he served on the National Advisory Board from 1982-2002 (Alic).

Through his work as a professor, recruiter, and advisor, Price assisted hundreds of students in attaining their professional goals. Dr. Tamerla Chavis, Beaumont’s only female neurosurgeon, “had a full scholarship for four years” (Cole) from the engineering department. Chavis fondly remembered, “We all knew he was there for us. He was part brother, part father-figure, part jokester” (Chavis). Fregia who is now a successful businessman viewed Price as one of the people who ““were pillars in my life - people who helped me to believe that I could take the next step”” (qtd. in “Cookin’”). Their stories are “not unique” (Chavis).

Price also had a profound impact on the faculty of Lamar University. He stood out

because “he would always carry around a meter stick” (Coppin, Charles A. Personal). In my interview with Dr. Charles Coppin, Chair of Lamar Mathematics, he expressed his impression of Dr. Price during the four years they worked together, noting that Price “cared a lot for his students” and was active in the community. Coppin “was struck by Dr. Price’s affability and quick wit” (Coppin, Charles A. “Chair's Letter.”). Coppin said that Price would sometimes give him advice. Price’s religion also spilled into his profession, and according to Coppin, “he would give the prayer” at department banquets. The chair knew many faculty members who had positive things to say about Price (Coppin, Charles A. Personal). The virtue they saw in him was the excellence that comes with knowledge and wisdom.

Price’s character and achievement have been recognized outside of the Lamar community. In 2004 as a token to his commitment to the organization’s mission, the National Society of Black Engineers awarded Price a Golden Torch Award for Lifetime Achievement in Academia (“News Briefs.”). Also in honor of Price’s work, Annie Carter, Chair of Golden Triangle-Texas Alliance for Minorities in Engineering, established an endowment for the Richard L. Price Scholarship in Engineering, Math, and Science to mark his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. Even with this great honor, Price humbly stated that, “It’s nothing personal about it...it’s an avenue that gets another youngster to say I can get a scholarship and go to school” (Gallaspy). In August 2006, Price retired from Lamar University (Gallaspy). Soon afterwards, the auditorium of the John Gray Center at Lamar University was dedicated as the Dr. Richard L. Price Auditorium (“Dr. Richard”). Price’s retirement did not last long. After four months he returned to his life’s purpose – education. Price now works part-time teaching pre-calculus and calculus at Ozen High School (Gallaspy).

While the details of Dr. Price’s life are distinctive; his story, like that of his students,

occurs often. Thousands of African Americans have overcome poverty and discouraging situations through quality education. They have mounted “with wings as eagles” - wings of education (The Rainbow). What are eagles without wings? What are people without education? In the interview Price noted, “A lot of people can function without education..., but education gives a person so much freedom” (Price, Richard L. Personal). When I asked for his philosophy of education, he told me that he may go down to talk to his students as long as they allowed him to elevate them to excellence. “I believe in excellence,” he said. Lamar alumna, Dr. Chavis shared the same philosophy after studying under Price. She thanked Price for enabling her to improve her family’s standard of living so that “we are able to bring people up.”

In the opening minutes of his speech at the dedication of the Dr. Richard L. Price Auditorium at Lamar University, Price offered the anecdote of a childhood baseball game which he would watch through cracks in a fence, which was the only way African Americans could watch baseball games. In order to see, he would have to be lifted up. Sometimes, he would share an apple crate box. But sometimes, an older brother came long and lifted him unto his shoulder. “I didn’t have to share that shoulder,” Price said. Price concluded by saying, “Be a shoulder for all those [that are] younger than you. And at the moment when you cannot be a shoulder give them a box to stand on” (Price, Richard L. Speech.) He lived this throughout his career giving hundreds the box of education to lift them from the depths of mediocrity. I have received both a shoulder and a box, and I am closer to my dream of a school in Bangladesh.

## Works Cited

**Primary Sources**

Chavis, Tamerla. Speech. Dedication of the Dr. Richard L. Price Auditorium. John Gray Center, Beaumont, Texas. 9 Sept. 2008. Chavis' speech provided me with a glimpse of the esteem with which Price's students held him.

Coppin, Charles A. "Chair's Letter." *The Lamar Mathematician* 5 (Spring 2006): 2. Dr. Coppin solidified my impressions on Price's intelligence, personality, and humor.

Coppin, Charles A. Personal interview. 30 Jan. 2009. Dr. Coppin, head of the math department at Lamar University, provided information on the career of Dr. Price.

Price, Richard L. Personal interview. 29 Jan. 2009. Dr. Price allowed me to interview him at Ozen High School. I learned the facts of his life and his philosophy on life which makes him an inspiring role model.

Price, Richard L. Speech. Dedication of the Dr. Richard L. Price Auditorium. John Gray Center, Beaumont, Texas. 9 Sept. 2008. On September 9, 2008 Lamar University dedicated an auditorium in honor of Dr. Price. I gathered information from his speech at the dedication.

**Secondary Sources**

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provided me information on the influences of Price's father and the Korean War.

Cole, Cathleen. "Seeing the Potential (Chavis)." *Cardinal Cadence* 23 May 2008. Lamar University. 30 Jan. 2009 <[http://www.lamar.edu/newsevents/cc/461\\_6505.htm](http://www.lamar.edu/newsevents/cc/461_6505.htm)>. This essay provided me information on the involvement of Dr. Price in Dr. Chavis' education and the attainment of her medical degree.

"Cookin' with Grandma Maud." *Cardinal Cadence* Spring 2004: 28. In this citation I learned of Price's extreme compassion and dedication to education through mentoring and advising of students.

"Dr. Richard L. Price Auditorium to honor professor, mentor." *Welcome to Lamar University*. 9 Sept. 2008. 30 Jan. 2009 <[http://www.lamar.edu/newsevents/articles/221\\_6931.htm](http://www.lamar.edu/newsevents/articles/221_6931.htm)>. After reading this citation I was able to know the character and dedication of Dr. Price. I also was able to see the vast impact he had on his students.

Gallaspy, Beth. "Retirement Rebound (Price)." *Cardinal Cadence* 23 May 2008. Lamar University. 30 Jan. 2009 <[http://www.lamar.edu/newsevents/cc/461\\_6506.htm](http://www.lamar.edu/newsevents/cc/461_6506.htm)>. This citation focused on Price's work on recruiting minority students in engineering and math. He continues after retirement to teach and recruit high school students. I used the photo of Dr. Price for my introduction.

*The Rainbow Study Bible King James Version: Illustrated Reference Edition*. Grand Rapids: Standard, 1998. I used the quote from this source to illustrate his ethical and religious approach to education.

"News Briefs." *Cardinal Cadence* Fall 2004. This article explained to me the meaning of The Golden Torch Award which was awarded to Price in 2004.