

Tulane community mourns the passing of a public health hero

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The public health community is mourning the sudden passing of Dr. Paul Farmer, one of the founders of [Partners In Health](#) and the subject of "Mountains Beyond Mountains," a 2003 book by Tracy Kidder, and "Bending the Arc," a 2017

documentary. Farmer was 62.

Farmer first visited Haiti in 1982 after earning an undergraduate degree from Duke University and before beginning his medical school and doctoral anthropology studies at Harvard. His experience in Haiti would set the course for his life, with Farmer returning time and time again to Haiti, raising millions to set up a workable medical infrastructure for the impoverished country.

Later he would found Partners In Health along with colleagues Ophelia Dahl, Thomas White, Todd McCormack, and Jim Yong Kim. Boston-based Partners In Health is a global health care nonprofit dedicated to bringing the “benefits of modern medical science to those most in need of them and to serve as an antidote to despair.”

Dr. Arachu Castro, the Samuel Z. Stone Endowed Chair of Public Health in Latin America, worked with Farmer for over a dozen years and was devastated to receive the news early Monday morning. In an introduction at a book launch for Farmer's book "Pathologies of Power" in 2003, she declared that Farmer “stretched the boundaries of medical anthropology by incorporating a sophisticated social, clinical, and epidemiological analysis of health and social inequalities and by delineating the social and political etiology of infectious disease, particularly of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis.”

She said later in the same speech, “Paul’s scholarly work goes beyond the world of academia to bring, through what he terms pragmatic solidarity, social justice to those most affected by poverty and inequality.”

“Paul Farmer was a legend in global health,” said Dr. Thomas LaVeist, dean of the Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. “He co-founded one of the most impactful health organizations the world has ever known. He touched countless lives through his medical practice, through the many students he trained, and through the many people who were inspired by him. His passing is a great loss to the globe.”

“Paul Farmer was a man with a mission and a man ahead of his times in many ways,” said Dr. Richard Oberhelman, associate dean for global health. “As a medical anthropologist who was also a medical doctor, he personified the interdisciplinary niche in global health long before it became mainstream. Paul was known for his efforts to provide health care to low- and middle-income countries, and for his outreach efforts to support the most impoverished groups that disproportionately

bore the burden of infectious diseases. His work with Partners In Health significantly influenced public health strategies for responding to multidrug-resistant tuberculosis, HIV, and Ebola. He was a role model and an inspiration for global health students and practitioners around the world. We will miss him very much.”

Although Partners in Health was based in Boston, Farmer’s reach spread around the globe, from Haiti to Peru, and Russia to Rwanda. According to Castro, however, New Orleans was his favorite city. In 2018 he was recognized by Tulane University with an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters. He spoke at the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine [graduation ceremony](#) that same year and energized the graduating students, parents, alumni, and faculty in attendance.

“Let’s study the social determinants of disease,” he concluded his speech, “but never turn our backs on the critically ill or injured.”

“It was when I read 'Mountains Beyond Mountains' that I first became interested in international health,” said alumna Dr. Angela Lane (MD/MPH ’16). “Many people do incredible things, but Paul Farmer’s passion about going into places with seemingly insurmountable challenges and helping to set up health care systems with an overarching principle that no person is more valuable and deserves less than any other—it’s hard not to be inspired by someone like that.”

In 2020, Farmer received the \$1 million Berggruen Prize for Philosophy & Culture, an award given annually to thinkers whose ideas have profoundly shaped human self-understanding and advancement in a rapidly changing world.

Farmer leaves his wife, Didi Bertrand Farmer; their three children, Catherine, Elizabeth, and Sebastian; and a global legacy that changed how the world thinks about health, disease, and social structure.