

# [Minnie Joycelyn Elders \(1933–\)](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

By: Ross, J. Nalubega Keywords: [Joycelyn Elders](#) <sup>[2]</sup> [Minnie Joycelyn Elders](#) <sup>[3]</sup> [Philander Smith College](#) <sup>[4]</sup> [Bill Clinton](#) <sup>[5]</sup> [US Army](#) <sup>[6]</sup> [Delta Sigma Theta](#) <sup>[7]</sup> [Edith Irby Jones](#) <sup>[8]</sup>

Minnie Joycelyn Elders, known as Joycelyn Elders, is a pediatrician and professor at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in Little Rock, Arkansas. In 1953, Elders began to work with the US Army, where she trained as a physical therapist, being the only African American woman in her training class. Elders eventually became a medical doctor in 1956, specializing in pediatric [endocrinology](#) <sup>[9]</sup>. In 1993, then US President Bill Clinton appointed Elders as the Surgeon General for the United States Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, which she served as until 1994. At that time, Elders was the first African American to hold the position of Surgeon General in the US. Throughout her career, Elders often spoke about controversial topics, like comprehensive sexual health education and [abortion](#) <sup>[10]</sup>. During her time as Surgeon General, Elders advocated for universal health care coverage, promoting comprehensive sexual health education and bringing awareness to teen [pregnancy](#) <sup>[11]</sup> in the US.

Joycelyn Elders was born Minnie Lees Jones in Schaal, Arkansas, on 13 August 1933. Elders was the eldest of eight children born to Haller Reed and Curtis Jones. The Jones family, including the children, worked as sharecroppers in a poor, racially-segregated farming community. Sharecropping is a practice that began at the end of the American Civil War, where a landlord allows people to use and live on their property in exchange for a profit from the land's crops. According to her autobiography, titled *Joycelyn Elders, M.D.* and written alongside David Chanoff, Reed taught Elders to read, which, at that time, was not common for a young African American female. And by the age of five, in 1938, Elders could read and began her education at a racially-segregated school, thirteen miles from her home.

Elders attended school at Howard County Training School in Tollette, Arkansas. She often missed school to help her family pick cotton and corn during harvest season. At the age of fifteen, Elders graduated as valedictorian from Howard County Training School. Following her graduation, in 1948, the United Methodist Church offered her a scholarship to attend Philander [Smith College](#) <sup>[12]</sup> in Little Rock, Arkansas, an all-Black school. However, her family did not have enough money to pay for the bus fare from Schaal to Little Rock, which cost nearly four US dollars at the time. To earn that money, Elders, along with her brothers and sisters, picked cotton and completed extra chores until they were able to afford the fare.

At Philander [Smith College](#) <sup>[12]</sup>, Elders studied biology and chemistry, aspiring to become a laboratory technician. While at Philander [Smith College](#) <sup>[12]</sup>, Elders joined Delta Sigma Theta, an [organization](#) <sup>[13]</sup> of college women, committed to public service in the Black community. As a member of Delta Sigma Theta, at sixteen years old, Elders attended a talk, given by medical doctor Edith Irby Jones, at the medical school University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in Little Rock, Arkansas, hereafter UAMS. At that time, Jones was the first African American woman to study at that medical school. In an interview, Elders stated that she wanted to be a laboratory technician and never thought about a career as a doctor until she met Jones, who inspired her to pursue the latter. Also during that time, Elders began to work as a maid for a woman named Eva Morton to afford school. Elders worked for Morton until she graduated from Philander State College in 1952, when she earned a Bachelor's degree in biology.

In 1952, Elders began to work as a nurse's aide at a veteran's hospital in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Also during that time, Elders married a fellow Philander [Smith College](#) <sup>[12]</sup> student, Cornelius Reynolds, who had a job with the Internal Revenue Service, or IRS, in Milwaukee. While living in Milwaukee, Elders signed up to join the US Army in May 1953. Following that, Elders ended her marriage with Reynolds.

In May 1953, Elders began to work with the US Army, where she trained as a physical therapist at Brooke Army Medical Center at a military base called Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas, where she was the only African American woman in her training class. After her training, she worked as a physical therapist at the Letterman Army Hospital in San Francisco, California, where she treated people wounded during the Korean War. Then, in 1954, the US Army transferred Elders to Fitzsimmons Hospital in Denver, Colorado. It was while working at Fitzsimmons Hospital that Elders worked as part of former US President Dwight D. Eisenhower's physical therapy team after he had a heart attack.

In 1956, Elders resigned her position in the US Army and moved to Little Rock to attend medical school at the UAMS. Using the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, or more commonly known as the GI Bill, Elders funded her medical studies. Former US President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the GI Bill, which provides funds for college education, unemployment insurance, and housing for veterans, into law on 22 June 1944.

Of her medical school class of 1956, Elders was one of three African American students and the only African American female student. Though, at that time, she was able to attend classes with her fellow white students, Elders and the other African American students could not eat with them in the cafeteria, which was a white-only cafeteria. As an African American student,

Elders had to eat her lunch with the cleaning staff, nurse's aides, and a few Black nurses in the Black cafeteria.

While attending medical school, Elders met her second husband Oliver Elders, a basketball coach, while she performed physical exams for the high school basketball team. They married in 1960, which was the same year that Elders graduated from medical school and began her internship in pediatrics at the [University of Minnesota](#)<sup>[14]</sup> Hospital in St. Paul, Minnesota. At the end of her internship in 1961, Elders returned to Little Rock and began her residency in pediatrics at UAMS. Eventually, Elders became chief resident, managing a group of all-male and all-white medical residents and interns.

In 1967, the [National Institutes of Health](#)<sup>[15]</sup>, or NIH, awarded Elders a career development award. During that same year, she earned a Master of Science degree in biochemistry from UAMS and began to work as an assistant professor in pediatrics at the same university. In 1971, the school promoted Elders to be an associate professor, and she eventually became a full professor in 1976. While working as a professor, Elders began a research and clinical practice in pediatric [endocrinology](#)<sup>[9]</sup>, or the study of glands and [hormones](#)<sup>[16]</sup> in children. In 1978, Elders received her certification as a pediatric endocrinologist.

Elders published over one hundred articles, focusing on juvenile diabetes. Juvenile diabetes is a condition where the pancreas does not make a sufficient amount of insulin, causing the body to not be able to absorb blood sugar to produce energy. While studying and working on juvenile diabetes, Elders noticed that young pregnant women with diabetes were more likely to have a [miscarriage](#)<sup>[17]</sup>, or the sudden termination of [pregnancy](#)<sup>[11]</sup>, or give birth to newborns with congenital abnormalities. That led Elders to study sexual behaviors among adolescents and help young female patients control their fertility.

In 1987, Bill Clinton, who was the Governor of Arkansas at the time, appointed Elders as the head of the Arkansas Department of Health. In that role, Elders campaigned for expanded comprehensive sexual health education in schools, which caused controversy with religious groups. Also during her time in that role, Elders saw a ten-fold increase in the number of childhood screenings and helped to almost double the immunization rates of two-year-old children in Arkansas. And in 1989, the Arkansas Legislature eventually mandated that schools include sexual health education, as well as substance-abuse prevention and programs to promote self-esteem among children. In 1992, Elders became the President of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officers, or ASTHO. The ASTHO is a non-profit [organization](#)<sup>[13]</sup> that represents public health agencies in the US and its territories and helps to develop public health policy and ensure excellence in state-based public health practice.

On 8 September 1993, Clinton, then US President, appointed Elders as Surgeon General of the US Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, or the PHSCC. The Surgeon General heads the PHSCC, which is responsible for the promotion, protection, and advancement of health in the US. At that time, Elders was the first African American to become Surgeon General in the US. The appointment was met with opposition. For example, former Senator of Missouri, John Danforth, described Elders as being unimpressive and foolish. But despite that opposition, the US Senate confirmed Elders as Surgeon General, and she was sworn into the position on 10 September 1993.

As Surgeon General, Elders advocated, alongside Clinton, for universal health care in the US, and she also continued to champion comprehensive sexual education. In a 1994 interview with Claudia Dreifus of *The New York Times*, Elders stated that she supported the pro-choice movement, defending access to [abortion](#)<sup>[10]</sup> care, or medical procedures to terminate [pregnancy](#)<sup>[11]</sup>. Elders also advocated to make the drug RU-486, or mifepristone, available in the US. Mifepristone is a drug used to terminate pregnancies, which was legal in France, Sweden, and the United Kingdom at that time.

While Elders served as Surgeon General, the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, or AIDS, epidemic was ongoing in the US. The human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV, causes AIDS, damaging the body's immune system. On 1 December 1994, or World AIDS Day, Elders attended a conference at the United Nations in New York City, New York, and participated in a panel discussion focused on the need to get rid of taboos regarding sex as a way to fight the AIDS epidemic in the US. During that panel discussion, psychologist Rob Clark asked Elders if there were any prospects for more discussion and promotion of masturbation. Masturbation is the touching of one's own body, especially the genitals, for sexual pleasure. In response to Clark's question, Elders stated that children should learn that masturbation is a part of human sexuality.

But Elders' statement about masturbation caused controversy. A week after the conference, Leon Panetta, then White House Chief of Staff, requested that Elders resign from her position as Surgeon General. Panetta requested that Elders resign because of her answer to Clark's question about masturbation. However, in her autobiography, Elders states that she declined to turn in her resignation until she had spoken to Clinton. Clinton ultimately asked Elders to resign due to the incident at the conference. Elders resigned as Surgeon General in December 1994, having served in the position for fifteen months.

Upon her resignation, Elders returned to Little Rock and continued to work as a pediatrician and a professor. In January 1995, she returned her former position as a professor of pediatrics at UAMC. In 1999, Elders retired from her medical practice but continued as a professor of pediatrics. In 2009, the [University of Minnesota](#)<sup>[14]</sup> Medical School in St. Paul, Minnesota, established a position called the Joycelyn Elders Chair in Sexual Health Education. That position's goal is to create a life-long sexual education curriculum and to increase the number of health providers trained in sexual health care.

As of 2021, Elders serves as professor emerita at the UAMC, often advocating for comprehensive sexual health education and speaking out against teen [pregnancy](#)<sup>[11]</sup>.

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## Subject

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## Topic

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