



DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARDS

Henry Tomes Jr. '60g, '63g

To Henry Tomes Jr. for his professional accomplishments in the field of psychology and for championing the psychological well-being of marginalized and underrepresented communities throughout the country.

Henry Tomes Jr. is the first African-American to earn a doctorate in clinical psychology from Penn State. Although proud of his education, he said that when he arrived on campus in 1957, it was “a whole different world” from today.

“My education was first-rate. The faculty was really good, I learned a lot from them,” Tomes said. “However, as I was the first African-American graduate student admitted into the clinical psychology program, the faculty had difficulty relating to me as a person. Unlike my student peers who developed mentoring relationships with faculty members, I was unable to do so. My student friends shared with me the things that had been shared with them. So I did learn the social and academic processes important in negotiating the rocky shoals of graduate study, albeit in a second-hand manner.”

Years later in the late 1970s, when Tomes was 15 years into his professional career, the Penn State faculty became aware of

Tomes' work in the area of mental health. He was invited back to campus to present colloquia, where he spoke to a more diverse set of graduate students than during his days as a Penn Stater. “Some faculty, who had been present during my student days, shared their regrets about their treatment of me,” Tomes explained, “indicating, ‘We just didn’t know what to do for you.’”

Reflecting on the era during which he was a graduate student, Tomes said he did not anticipate being mentored or cared for as a student. “All I wanted then was an opportunity to go to school and Penn State gave me that opportunity, for which I will be forever grateful.”

Tomes made much of that opportunity and went on to have an illustrious career in psychology; his areas of expertise are community mental health and ethnic minority psychology. He has held several positions that have helped to shape the U.S. mental health system.

After graduation, Tomes moved to Nashville, Tenn., where he was on the faculty at Meharry Medical College, and later, he became the director of the college's community mental health center. Next, he directed community mental

health programs for Washington State. In 1989, Tomes made history again as the first African-American and psychologist to serve as the commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health. From 1991 until his retirement in 2005, Tomes was the executive director of the Public Interest directorate of the American Psychological Association (APA). There, he used psychology to address social issues and worked to ensure the equitable treatment of all, including people of color.

One professional endeavor of which Tomes is most proud occurred during the Jimmy Carter presidency. Former first lady Rosalynn Carter, as active honorary chair of the President's Commission on Mental Health, invited Tomes to sit on the task force that helped bring about passage of the Mental Health Systems Act of 1980. “I really enjoyed developing mental health policy at that level,” Tomes said. “After they left the White House and returned to Georgia, I went to the Carter Center many times, often sharing meals with the former president.”

In 2007, in recognition of Tomes' “advocacy efforts and significant influence in promoting the well-being of underrepresented communities and

marginalized groups,” according to the APA, the organization created The Henry Tomes Awards for the Advancement of Ethnic Minority Psychology. These lifetime achievement awards honor psychologists from each ethnic minority community—African-American, Alaska Native/American Indian, Asian-American/Pacific Islander, and Latina/o American. In 2008, Tomes received Penn State's College of the Liberal Arts Outstanding Liberal Arts Alumni Award.

Tomes is a life member of the Penn State Alumni Association and lives in Chevy Chase, Md. He shares his life with longtime companion, Erma Withers. Tomes and his late wife, Elizabeth, had four children, Charles, Nancy, John, and Carol. Evelyn, his second wife, also deceased, helped raise them. Tomes has eight grandchildren: John, Candice, Jeremy, Brandon, Campbell, Erica, Christopher, and Jinnie, with whom he loves to travel.