

The John and Elizabeth Phillips Award 2020
Presented by the Trustees of Phillips Exeter Academy to
Emery N. Brown '74

October 30, 2020

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Emery, as the world's leading physician-scientist in anesthesiology, you are not only a renowned expert in your field but a true pioneer. By creatively applying knowledge derived from multiple disciplines — including neuroscience, statistics and anesthesiology — you have broadened our understanding of how drugs influence neural networks in the brain to achieve unconsciousness and have improved the comfort and safety of millions of surgical patients. Beyond the operating room, your discoveries have offered insights into possible cures for some of the deepest forms of human suffering: addiction, dementia and depression. As one colleague says, your “scientific contributions are profound enough to shed light on that which makes us most human — consciousness itself.”

Driving this work is your strong sense of social responsibility. At an early age, you internalized the ways in which your mother supported others as a social worker, teacher and advocate with the League of Women Voters. You went along as your father took members of your central Florida farming community to the polls to vote and listened intently at Sunday school as he translated biblical stories into practical lessons for how to live a purposeful life. As you say: “You can't live in a privileged situation like I do and not devote some non-trivial fraction of your energies to making other people's lives better. That's just the way it should be. Full stop.”

This privilege springs from your education, you say. When you were growing up in the 1960s, race-based segregation within American public schools still existed. Voluntary integration into a predominantly white school when you were in seventh grade offered new opportunities, including the ability to study modern languages, a pursuit that would become a lifelong passion. You quickly learned Spanish, then French, and when you were just 14, you partook in a six-week travel abroad program to France.

Your mother believed “you hadn't really been tested” and encouraged you to apply to Exeter's Summer School. You describe the experience of studying with “talented African-American students from all over” and “teachers who were just very encouraging” as “phenomenal.” You received a financial aid scholarship and enrolled at the Academy in 1973, the winter of your upper year. At Exeter, you say, you had the chance to realize your potential.

You went on to Harvard with a goal of learning “all the languages of the U.N.,” so you could communicate with anyone in the world. But a roommate's fascination with the GDP turned your attention to economics, and you graduated with a degree in applied mathematics. This would not be the last expansion of your academic pursuits.

Before starting at Harvard Medical School, you spent a year studying mathematics at the Institut Fourier in Grenoble on a Rotary Fellowship to perfect your French and prepare to pursue a doctorate in statistics along with your medical degree at Harvard. It was an avant-garde idea at the time, but you saw connections where others did not.

After completing an anesthesiology residency at Massachusetts General Hospital, you broadened your area of inquiry yet again, this time to neuroscience. For nearly 30 years, you have simultaneously practiced as an anesthesiologist, studied neuroscience and published more than 400 original papers. You have invented and patented landmark scientific and medical technologies with teams of collaborators, who extoll your “infinite curiosity and vast intellect.”

This body of work has earned you numerous prizes and the honor of being one of only 25 people — and the first African American, the first statistician and the first anesthesiologist — elected to all three branches of the National Academies: Medicine, Sciences and Engineering.

You were able to achieve all of this, in part, because of your distinctive ability to collaborate. Colleagues describe you as a “charismatic leader” who attracts people to work as a team to tackle challenging scientific problems.

Sharing your findings is as important to you as developing them. You are a frequent lecturer, presenting in Spanish or French when you are abroad to further understanding. As a professor of medical engineering and computational neuroscience at MIT, as well as a professor of anesthesiology at Harvard Medical School, you are the only person to hold simultaneous endowed chairs at both of these institutions. Former students relate that you are an “inspiring figure as a scientist and a mentor” who is always there to offer guidance or support.

While proud of these recognitions, you feel there is more to do. As you say, you’d like to “leave a stake in the ground that says, ‘We’re better because he solved this problem for us.’”

Emery, we believe your stake is firmly grounded. For the significant contributions you have already made in statistics, neuroscience and clinical medicine, we are honored to present you with the 2020 John and Elizabeth Phillips Award.