

New surgeon general was star student at Miami Palmetto Senior High

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The U.S. Senate on Monday approved President Barack Obama's nomination of Dr. Vivek Murthy to serve as U.S. surgeon general, despite opposition from Republicans and some Democrats over his support for gun control and past statements that gun violence is a public health issue. Murthy, 37, a physician at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital and instructor at Harvard Medical School, was the valedictorian at Miami Palmetto Senior High. CHARLES DHARAPAK / AP

Before Vivek Murthy was confirmed as surgeon general of the United States, he was the valedictorian at Miami Palmetto Senior High.

Murthy was just 16 years old when he graduated from the Pinecrest school with a 6.09 GPA. His accomplishments won him a prestigious Silver Knight award in general scholarship, and admission to Harvard University.

"Even then, he aspired for greatness," Palmetto anatomy teacher Lynn Evans recalled.

But that was just the beginning for Murthy, who would later go on to Yale Medical School and help build a non-profit public health organization. He was confirmed as the nation's top doctor late Monday.

The 51-43 vote in the U.S. Senate was months in the making.

Murthy, 37, was nominated by President Obama in November 2013. But his confirmation was delayed in part by the National Rifle Association, which took issue with his support for stronger gun control laws.

During Senate hearings, Murthy said he wouldn't use the position to push gun control. His priorities, he said: fighting obesity and promoting public health.

After Monday's vote, Obama said Murthy would "bring his lifetime of experience promoting public health to bear on priorities ranging from stopping new diseases to helping our kids grow up healthy and strong."

The nation has been without a Senate-confirmed surgeon general since July 2013. The surgeon general does not set policy but is an advocate for the people's health.

Murthy, the son of immigrants from India, first became interested in medicine during his childhood in Miami. His father was a doctor.

Evans, the veteran teacher at Palmetto, said Murthy was a standout student in her honors anatomy and physiology class.

“He was very young, but very mature,” she said. “He was driven. He was meticulous. He was always willing to help others.”

Evans included those details in the college recommendations she wrote for him.

“When you can say a student is in the top 1 percent of students you’ve had the opportunity to teach, you know that that kid is going somewhere,” she said.

Advanced Placement biology teacher Cullen Bullock remembered Murthy, too.

“I don’t know that he ever made a B,” Bullock said. “His test scores were always right at the top.”

Around the time of his graduation, Murthy was one of several student leaders interviewed in a Miami Herald story on kids and violence. In his interview, Murthy said television cartoons were part of the problem.

“Today, a typical elementary student wakes up on Saturday mornings to fiery gun battles, explosive scenes of terror and the violent decimation of the ‘bad guy’ — all this in a children’s cartoon,” he said. “With such destructive influence, society’s preoccupation with firearms and brutal methods of conflict resolution is no surprise.”

Nearly two decades later, conservative critics used that interview in an attempt to derail Murthy’s nomination for surgeon general.

The National Rifle Association had additional problems with his nomination, including his more recent statements that guns are a public health issue. Other critics raised concerns about his advocacy for the Affordable Care Act and his young age. He co-founded Doctors for America, a group that has pushed for affordable health care and supports Obama’s health care law.

Evans, the anatomy teacher, said she had been following each development closely. She watched Monday’s Senate vote on TV with her husband, she said.

Pinecrest Mayor Cindy Lerner said she, too, had been “rooting for [Murthy] ever since he was nominated.”

“We’re absolutely thrilled [he was confirmed],” said Lerner, who is also the founding president of the Palmetto Alumni Association. “Pinecrest and Palmetto Senior High take great pride in his accomplishments.”

Murthy had been practicing in Boston, but still has ties to South Florida. His father, Hall, and his sister, Rashmi, have a medical practice near Baptist Hospital in Kendall.

The new surgeon general is not the only successful member of his graduating class. Fellow 1994 graduate Jennifer Rodriguez won two bronze medals in speed-skating in the 2002 winter Olympics.

Other famous Palmetto High grads include Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos, astronaut Dom Gorie and young-adult fiction author Alex Flinn.

Bullock, the veteran Advanced Placement biology teacher, said he had high hopes for Murthy.

“That’s pretty awesome to be the surgeon general, the person who leads the nation in health issues,” he said. “I know he’s going to do some innovative things.”

This report was supplemented with information from the Associated Press.

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