At the recent meeting of the National Association of Community Health Centers in Orlando, Florida on August 27th, conferees attendees were treated to a remarkable front seat to history during the presentation of the Extraordinary Leadership Award. John Fairman, Chief Executive Officer of the Delta Health Center in Mound Bayou, MS, and Robert Smith, MD, Executive Director of Central Mississippi Health Services in Jackson, MS, were both honored. In his remarks, Fairman settled once and for all any questions that may be circulating about where the first Community Health Center was established — Mound Bayou, MS, or Columbia Point in Boston, MA.

“Columbia Point opened its doors first,” conceded Fairman. “But the Community Health Center Movement started in Mississippi.” Fairman also vividly described the experiences of the early pioneers of the movement in Mississippi as they confronted hostility and opposition in attempting to address the health inequities of the residents and Civil Rights activists during Freedom Summer. Dr. Smith, then a doctor fresh out of medical school, issued the “clarion call asking people of all races to help him care for Freedom Riders.” Two of those people who answered the call were doctors H. Jack Geiger and Count Gibson. Fairman also talked about how once these young pioneers started seeing their first patients in a church basement in Mound Bayou, Dr. Smith would leave his practice in Jackson and volunteer two or three days a week. Remarkably, when Dr. Smith realized he needed a faster mode of transportation to his patients at both sites, he procured a plane from a friend of his father’s and got a dirt landing strip and taught himself how to fly.” Dr. Smith accepted his award with a standing ovation from the audience. In his brief remarks, he thanked the many “unsung heroes who, with callused feet and callused hands, got us to where we are today.” Among them was his friend, Medgar Evers, the civil rights activist who was assassinated in 1963.