

CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
WESTERN RESERVE STUDIES SYMPOSIUM

BUILDING A MEDICAL COMMUNITY IN THE WESTERN RESERVE

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Allen Memorial Medical Library
Ford Auditorium

“Healing Others: Healing Ourselves” A Videohistory of the African American Nurse

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Northeast Ohio is a region of global importance in healthcare facilities and academic resources. The history of the medical community in the Western Reserve is a story of achievement, innovation, and leadership. The advancement of medicine is often the result of warfare.

The area is an untapped mine of African American nursing history. One of the supreme ironies in the history of nursing is how the status of these women of valor improved in times of war. The establishment of the Cadet Nurse Corps. by Cleveland Congresswoman Frances Payne Bolton was a milestone in the history of nursing and civil rights. As the architect of the Bolton Bill, she skillfully directed the legislation through Congress. The non-discrimination clause was a key amendment that ultimately led to the integration of the Army Nurse Corps. This action presaged the total desegregation of the armed forces that did not occur until President Truman issued an executive order. Mrs. Bolton also campaigned for the removal of the racial restrictions in the nursing school at Western Reserve University.

In 1971 the National Black Nurses Association was founded in Cleveland. Even though the American Nursing Association had desegregated in 1951, there were issues that African American nurses felt could only be addressed by this particular organization.

Historical Background

Nurses are special. As a gender based profession nursing is perceived as “woman’s work.” Yet when disease engulfs, or wounds of battle strike, it is the nurse whose comforting hand is sought. Florence Nightengale and Clara Barton come to mind. The issue of gender bias is a shared struggle. There are remarkable parallels of discrimination as one examines the travails of all nurses. However, it is the story of the African American nurse that compels our attention.

The qualities of heroic womanhood, galvanized by a sorority of consciousness, forged a bond that inspires the current generation of all nurses, regardless of origin. This project awakens us to the inspiring saga of the African American nurse, enriches our community while sensitizing us to the reality that pain and disease respect no gender or racial barriers.

This video production seeks to reclaim the heritage of all nurses who sought legitimacy and professional status. In the days of slavery and beyond, black women remained suffering servants of exploitation. However, they prevailed by evoking an extraordinary moral force coupled with an enduring faith in the ultimate promise of America. By the mid-twentieth century, through the skillful marshaling of allies, both black and white, the African American nurse began to see signs of success.

Through the courageous and astute organizational abilities of Mabel Keaton Staupers, the pivotal leader of the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses, (NACGN) black nurses achieved a measure of professional acceptance and integration. At last when the ANA removed racial barriers and black nurses were

admitted to the previously all white American Nurses Association, the NACGN, in a remarkable action, voted itself out of existence.

The **central theme** of the videohistory documents two interdependent, yet contradictory elements: the impact of racial exclusion while simultaneously motivating black nurses to organize inside their segregated ranks. Set in this ironic dichotomy, the agenda of the African American nurse awakened a broader consciousness. Eventually the walls of segregation began to crumble as the encompassing spirit of liberation emerged.

The videohistory of the African American nurse graphically conveys the larger story of civil rights in the twentieth century. The courageous leadership of black nurses in their quest for acceptance anticipated the struggles that lay ahead for the rest of the nation.

A critical dimension of public education is the awareness of not only diversity, but also how we unite as citizens in a common cause. The victories of black nurses over racial and gender bias were achieved through the building of coalitions, and educating the greater community about their particular concerns. By appealing to a larger vision of what the nation stands for, i.e. equality under law, these courageous women of color redeemed the historic pledge of our nation.

Through the consistent effort of white philanthropic organizations like the Rosenwald Fund, Rockefeller Foundation, and prominent leaders like Eleanor Roosevelt, Frances Payne Bolton, and dozens of supportive colleagues in the American Nursing Association, the dream of a colorblind society was at last on the agenda of healthcare leaders.

The assembled talent for the video project merges the best in historical scholarship with African American nurses in positions of national leadership. It features an eminent historian as the anchor and scholar in the field of African American women, **Dr. Darlene Clark Hine**. With the appearance of **Dr. Mary Elizabeth Carnegie** we involve a true pioneer in nursing advancement. Through her numerous publications, dozens of national awards, and as the first Dean of the University of Florida A and M's school of nursing, Dr. Carnegie lighted the path for all. .

The inherent value of this project is magnified by the inclusion of the Health Careers Center High School in Cleveland. By profiling a graduate of that school, showing their advancement with additional education and employment at an area hospital, the powerful message of success becomes part of the rich legacy of those African American women of "history." Young students tend to see history as happening to someone else. In this video project history is directly connected to them.

This project was made possible by: The Mt. Sinai Healthcare Foundation, The Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, the Ohio Humanities Council, and the Cuyahoga Community College Foundation.

A film premiere of "Healing Others Healing Ourselves: The History of the African American Nurse" will be shown on Saturday, October 13, at 4 p.m. in the Herrick Room.