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WSSU Reaches A Major Milestone

By: **Dr. Phoebe Pollitt, RN**

Abstract

In 2023, the Winston Salem State University (WSSU) School of Nursing celebrated 70 years of service. Thirty three African American women made history on September 15, 1953, when they became the inaugural class of nursing students at Winston Salem State Teachers College (now WSSU). They were greeted by recently-hired Beverly W. Knight, professor of nursing studies. Knight was a graduate of Spellman College, Lincoln Hospital School of Nursing in New York City, and had earned a Master's Degree from Columbia University. Together, this group of dedicated, determined, and professional women built a foundation for the outstanding College of Nursing at WSSU today.

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WSSU Reaches a Major Milestone

By NCNA Member Dr. Phoebe Pollitt, RN; Nursing History Council Vice Chair

In 2023, the Winston Salem State University (WSSU) School of Nursing celebrated 70 years of service. Thirty three African American women made history on September 15, 1953, when they became the inaugural class of nursing students at Winston Salem State Teachers College (now WSSU). They were greeted by recently-hired Beverly W. Knight, professor of nursing studies. Knight was a graduate of Spellman College, Lincoln Hospital School of Nursing in New York City, and had earned a Master's Degree from Columbia University. Together, this group of dedicated, determined, and professional women built a foundation for the outstanding College of Nursing at WSSU today.

Several factors contributed to the state legislature's approval of funding for this new school. Perhaps the two most important were: (1) the great need for nurses to staff the segregated African American hospitals and the African American wards and wings found in some white hospitals in the state, and (2) to maintain segregation within the state University system.

The US Supreme Court had ruled in 1938 that if a state chose to enforce racial segregation, then it must offer comparable collegiate and graduate school programs to all races within the state. In 1950 the state legislature funded a baccalaureate



Of the 33 students who entered in the fall of 1953, twelve graduated in 1957. WSSU's first graduating class of 1957 had 12 students, 10 of whom are pictured here.

program for white students at UNC-Chapel Hill, so it was forced to open similar schools for African American students.

Classes were held in the Student Health Center building until the first building designated for the School of Nursing opened



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Today the Division of Nursing at Winston-Salem State University is a national premier nursing school based on excellence in education, research, and public service, as well as diversity

segregated white hospital in town (Baptist Hospital, Forsyth County Hospital) would open their doors for clinical experiences for African American students. According to Digital Forsyth:

Undaunted, Nursing School administrators established affiliations for pediatric nursing at Fordham Hospital in New York City and for psychiatric experience at Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn, NY. In 1955, the NC Board of Nurse Registration gave the School of Nursing full accreditation. These clinical affiliations were successful, and, soon, additional opportunities for clinical experience were arranged with Meharry Medical School of Nursing in Nashville, Tennessee, Grady Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia, Crownsville Hospital in Maryland, and Harlem Hospital in New York City. Three-months of residency at a hospital located far from Winston-Salem not only offered a student valuable insight into the nursing profession but also important life experience.

By 1964, WSSU reported there were 11 nursing faculty members, 6 with graduate degrees. Of the 141 graduates

in 1956. Kate Bitting Reynolds Memorial Hospital served as the first clinical site, but the North Carolina Board of Nursing deemed it inadequate to train students in obstetrics, pediatrics and psychiatric nursing. No

64 were practicing nursing in North Carolina. Seven graduates had gone on to Master's programs.

The school continued to grow and prosper in the 1970s, with the National League for Nursing awarding the program full accreditation in 1972. Gilbert Hill became the first male graduate of the program in 1977.

In the 1980s enrollment declined and passing rates on the State Board of Nursing Examination were decreasing. There was even talk in the state legislature of closing the program. Under the leadership of Dr. Sylvia Flack and Chancellor Cleon Thompson, Jr. the curriculum was revised, faculty reinvigorated, and standards were raised. By 1995 the WSSU SON had one of the highest passing rates in the state. Enrollment increased, new programs were added, and the program flourished.

Today the Division of Nursing at Winston-Salem State University is a national premier nursing school based on excellence in education, research, and public service, as well as diversity in student population and program offerings. The school offers multiple pathways to earn a BSN, several MSN and a DNP degree program.

Are you interested in joining the Nursing History Council? We would love to have you! NCNA members are welcome to join any council they wish. To change your council status, simply update your Member Profile at www.ncnurses.org or email ChrisBird@ncnurses.org.

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the view of the North Carolina Nurses Association or its board of directors. ■

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