



Dr. Ernestine Brown Small: Activist, Leader, Scholar

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

Abstract

With intelligence, determination, and courage, Ernestine Brown Small, born into a family of rural sharecroppers in Northampton County, became the 34th President of NCNA. Small's parents were unable to finish high school because they had to work to help feed their families during the Great Depression. At age 16, Small completed all the education available to her in the segregated, 2-room schoolhouse in her Pleasant Hill community. With the encouragement of her teachers and family, Small was accepted into the BSN program at Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. She was inducted into the Alpha Kappa Mu Honor Society. After graduating at age 20, Small took a job at the segregated Moses Cone Hospital (MCH) in Greensboro, NC. That same year, 1963, the hospital was legally forced to integrate its facilities. Small was chosen by the administration to be the first African American to eat in the formerly all-white hospital cafeteria. This was one of her first acts promoting civil rights.

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Dr. Ernestine Brown Small: Activist, Leader, Scholar

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



Ernestine Brown Small

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During her second year at MCH, Small decided to expand her professional opportunities, becoming the only African American to graduate with a Master of Science in Nursing degree from the Catholic University in Washington, D.C. in 1967.

At the same time, UNC-Greensboro was developing a new baccalaureate nursing program. With her newly minted MSN degree, Small, aged 24, successfully applied for a faculty position and became the first African American faculty member, in any department, at UNC-G. She also became the first African American faculty member at a formerly all-white school of nursing in North Carolina. Only a daring, young, energetic nurse would have accepted this challenge.

Small could have taught at many other nursing programs, including the nearby HBCU North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University, but she wanted to be in the forefront of the racial integration occurring in the country at that time. She remained at UNC-G from 1967 to 1991, earning promotions and tenure.

While working at UNC-Greensboro, Small continued her educational accomplishments earning both a Family Nurse Practitioner certificate from the University of Virginia and an EdD from NC State University. Her 1989 dissertation topic was Factors Associated with Political Participation of Nurses.

In the 1970s and 80s, while Small was teaching full time, continuing her own education, and raising a family, she was very active in several community and professional associations - particularly the NCNA and the NC Board of Nursing (NCBON). She was the first African American to be elected President of the NCNA (1979-1981).

With her leadership, alongside NCNA leaders Gene Tranbarger and Rebecca Taylor, nurses in NC were successful in convincing the 1981 General Assembly to approve several changes to the Nurse Practice Act. Two were very significant. The first was defining the scope of LPN and RN nursing practice and requiring the LPN and RN designation to perform acts within the scopes of practice. The other was mandating the majority of members of the Board of Nursing be elected by nurses across the state. Prior to this change, members of the Board of Nursing were appointed by the governor and the General Assembly. These appointments often went to physicians and hospital administrators as political favors, and advancing nursing was not always their priority.

In 1982, the year after her NCNA presidency, Small was the first African American elected to the NCBON.

Her career continued for many years, as the Dean at the School of Nursing at North Carolina Central University and then at Winston-Salem State University. Later, she led a diversity program at UNC-Chapel Hill. Small is now retired and living in Memphis, Tennessee. NC nurses are indebted to Ernestine Small for her courage, tenacity, and leadership throughout her career.

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 LaurenZahn@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. ■