

STATEN ISLAND MUSEUM

Apart Together - Transcript of Audio Stops

The speaker is Virginia Allen, who worked on the nursing staff at Seaview from 1947-1957. The interview was conducted by David Tarnow for the Staten Island Museum in 2015. The clips were edited in 2022 by Gabriella Leone, the exhibition curator.

Virginia Allen Audio Stop 1: I came to Staten island, uh, as a very young girl at 16 years old, just out of high school from Detroit, Michigan. My parents gave me permission to come to New York and live with my aunt Edna, who was a registered nurse at Seaview hospital. One of the premier hospitals that treated tuberculosis in the country. And, um, I live with her for about six months, but the most exciting part about my coming is I was able to get a job at Seaview. I went up the next day after I arrived and applied for a job and they hired me right away. Um, my job was working with children, who had tuberculosis from infancy to about 16. They lived in, um, the, the children's ward, which was a beautiful building on the grounds of Seaview. Apart from the adult buildings, there were four floors and, uh, the children were like any other child at home, except that they had tuberculosis and they had to be treated. Some were operated on - surgical procedures on their extremities or their lungs. And they were very fragile.

Virginia Allen Audio Stop 2: Tuberculosis was an epidemic in those days because people were very poor. They were very poor - poorly nourished. People came from all over the United States to Seaview hospital to be treated. It was a huge facility with, um, eight buildings for adults and one building for children. There must have been at least if not more than two thousand patients on the grounds at any time, Seaview was built on a very high hill, a high area. Uh, now it's called the Greenbelt, but it was in a space where it was very high up. And, um, the treatment at that time was diet, fresh air, and rest. That was the only treatment for tuberculosis and the patients got plenty of that because the dietary department was wonderful. Everyone who came to Seaview even as, um, guest, uh, but the staff as well, commented on the good food. The diet was vegetables that was grown in Farm Colony, which was the farm across the street from the hospital, uh, fresh meat uh, pigs. I know, I'm not sure about cattle uh was produced over there. The dieticians were very careful to make sure that the patients got, had a nourishing diet, full, rounded diet.

Virginia Allen Audio Stop 3: These were nurses who came from all over, uh, the south north, uh, everywhere. They came to work at Seaview Hospital because you couldn't get help at that time. There was a dire shortage of nurses. The nurses were recruited from as far away as the Caribbean and the Philippines, and most of the Black nurses were hired. Uh, I would say, uh, the majority of the nurses there were Black because they couldn't get jobs in other areas, even though they were very well trained with degrees. White nurses did not apply for these jobs because of the, um, danger of catching tuberculosis. Was a very high-risk job. So, uh, they almost had to hire black nurses in order to have enough staff to take care of the patients. And it's unfortunate, only a few Caucasians worked at Seaview.

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Virginia Allen Audio Stop 4: Well at that time, I was so young and, um, I had not seen so much death, uh, before working at Seaview hospital or even illness and, and people in such pain. So it was quite, uh, depressing, but you try to do your best. I think the patients I worked with, which were, um, very young and mischievous - they were young mischievous children, um, regarded me as one of their, um, relatives more or less because I too was quite young - a big sister. It was easy to relate to the young people that I work with. Most of the patients who were confined to Seaview - it was like their home. They were there for years and you got to know them like, you know, see them grow up from childhood to adolescence or, or adulthood. Seaview Children's Ward was more or less a boarding school because it was long term. It was a long-term illness that had to be treated onsite.

Virginia Allen Audio Stop 5: I worked at Seaview hospital from 1947 until 1957 and I'm very happy that I was there when the cure was founded -by Dr. Robitzek. It was such a joyous occasion. Uh, the patients were able to take the medication for a certain length of time and - when they were in the research stage of it. And when their disease was halted and they were improving - their health was improving - it was such a joy to see so many patients discharged to go home and take the medication from home and be treated in that way. Because patients just didn't leave Seaview. Most of them died or they were, they grew very old there.

Virginia Allen Audio Stop 6: Nurses at Seaview hospital were more like a family. Some of them lived in the nurses' residence, which I did after a certain period of time of living with my aunt. Two other cousins came to go to school in New York. And I had the opportunity to move into the nurses' residence, which I did. And it was a good experience because it was still like being home because the nurses there looked out for me, people, uh, some of them cooked. Others, you know, we played games, played cards, read books. It was like a homey environment.

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Virginia Allen Audio Stop 7: I would say that my experience at Seaview hospital formed my life because I had all positive experiences there. I learned a lot from the nurses that I worked with, the “Black Angels.” And some of those women were like aunts to me. They were friends of my aunt, Edna Sutton-Ballard. The black nurses in the Staten Island community were like any other women. They went out to teas. They went to church in the neighborhood - St. Phillips Baptist Church, many of them belonged to - and Shiloh Baptist Church. They kept up their affiliations of church membership. Um, they were married to teachers. As a matter of fact, my aunt didn't get married until she moved to New York. They were members of the New York Urban League and the NAACP, which is the National Association for Colored People, an organization that fights for the civil rights of all people, not just Black people. There were several members of Lambda Kappa Mu Sorority who worked at Seaview Hospital: Saralina Lott, Sarah Tennessee Baker, Ms. Noble, who was my first nurse in admitting at Seaview. Sarah Tennessee Baker, after I finished my, um, nurses training and was out working, asked me if I would like to, uh, become a member of Lambda Kappa Mu Sorority. And of course, I pledged and I became a member. The sorority was for business and professional women, because some of the women in the sorority were teachers and social workers. It was a nice sisterhood to belong to. And I am still a member - a member since 1977 [laughs].

Virginia Allen Audio Stop 8: One Christmas, I was helping my aunt, uh, put up her Christmas cards. Every year she received a huge amount of Christmas cards. And, um, she would string them across the living room wall. And like you would a wreath, um, a garland. And I was talking to her and asking her, uh, where she received some of her cards. And we were reading them. She told me that, uh, a lot of her patient sent her cards and during the course of the conversation, she told me that the patients felt that the nurses there were their angels, their Black angels. And that is how I found out about the “Black Angels” - who the “Black Angels” were.