

**Virginia Allen Interview with David Tarnow Full Transcript - 2015**

Virginia (00:00):

My name is Virginia Allen. I live on Staten Island, one of the five boroughs of New York. And, um, I've been on Staten Island for numerous years. I came here as a young woman of 16 and I am 83 now. 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 lived 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.

Virginia (01:30):

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, their lungs, and they were very fragile. Tuberculosis was an epidemic in those days because people were very poor. They were very poor--poorly nourished. And, um, 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 2000 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.

Virginia (03:10):

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 diet, uh, the dietary department was wonderful. Everyone who came to Seaview even as, um, guests, uh, but the staff as well commented on the good food. The diet was, uh, vegetables that was grown in, um, Farm Colony, which was the farm across the street from the hospital. Uh, fresh meat, some of the, uh, pigs and, and, and, um, uh, pigs, I know; I'm not sure about, um, cattle, uh, was, um, produced over there. And, um, the dieticians were very careful to make sure that the patients got a nourishing diet, full, rounded diet.

Virginia (04:24):

Well, my daily job was mainly to bathe the patients. Um, I would say, um, bathe the patients make certain that their, uh, dressings were done properly, um, played with them because they were children and, um, they had school, but when they came to the wards after school time, uh, they--we play games with them and read to them. So the children were like children in our own homes.

Virginia (05:06):

One, uh, 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, a wreath, um, a garland. And I said--I was talking to her and, uh, asking her, uh, where she received some of her cards, and we were reading them. She told me that, uh, a lot out of her patient center cards and during the course of the conversation, she told me that the patients felt that the

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nurses there were their angels, their black angels. And that is how I found out about The Black Angels, who The Black Angels were. 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, um, shortage of nurses and 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, of the nurses there were black because they couldn't get jobs in other areas, even though they were very well trained with degrees because at that time, um, the, the, um, professions of choice was nurses or teachers. And, um--

Speaker 2 ([07:07](#)):

There were restrictions on Black... (Unintelligible)

Virginia ([07:08](#)):

Oh, yes.

Speaker 2 ([07:10](#)):

So I wonder if you can go into that.

Virginia ([07:13](#)):

I, I will. Um, white nurses did not apply for these jobs because of the, um, danger of catching tuberculosis was a very highly effe-- um, um...

Speaker 2 ([07:28](#)):

High risk.

Virginia ([07:30](#)):

High risk job. And, um...

Speaker 2 ([07:37](#)):

So, so there was um, there was some danger involved.

Virginia ([07:39](#)):

Yes. So, uh, they, 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.

Speaker 2 ([07:58](#)):

And what, what kind of skills would you have to employ to be, be a good nurse at Seaview?

Virginia ([08:06](#)):

You would have to--

Speaker 2 ([08:07](#)):

Sorry, in order to be a good nurse?

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Virginia (08:10):

Yes. In order to be a, um, good professional nurse at Seaview Hospital, you would have to adhere to certain guidelines for, um...

Speaker 2 (08:29):

You probably have to have a lot of patience, for one thing.

Virginia (08:31):

Yes. I'm thinking about something else. That's why I needed my notes.

Speaker 2 (08:36):

All right. Well, go ahead. If you want to pause and, and look at them.

Virginia (08:39):

Yes.

Speaker 2 (08:39):

Ready?

Virginia (08:40):

Isolation Technique was quite important, especially in the care of, of tuberculosis patients who were highly, um, infected. The nurses had to not only, um, practice, but teach all of the staff Isolation Technique.

Speaker 2 (09:09):

And what did that consist of?

Virginia (09:10):

Wearing your mask properly, disposing the patients' um, uh, um, body fluids properly. Uh, there were tests that were done that had to be, you had to wear gloves and mask and gowns and make certain you didn't transmit, um, the germs from one patient to the other. And due to the, um, high professionalism and the wonderful training that I received while I was at Seaview Hospital, I have never had--uh, um, I would say I'm in very good health. I'm, uh, experiencing excellent health at my age, wherein some of the nurses, unfortunately, because of their-- Everybody is more, is susceptible to catching tuberculosis, but some were more susceptible than others. And I've been fortunate.

Speaker 2 (10:25):

Was there a kind of, uh, group feeling among the nurses, uh, satisfaction and, uh, like you were doing an important job?

Virginia (10:38):

Uh, the 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, uh, 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

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was a good experience because it was like still like being home because, uh, the nurses there looked out for me, people, uh, some of them cook, others, um, you know, we played games, played cards, read books. It was, it was like a homey, um, environment.

Speaker 2 ([11:33](#)):

And it must have given you a lot of satisfaction. I mean, when you look, look back at a, on it today, um, you know, to be able to, to really help people and cure them. I'm just imagining I'm trying to put myself in your shoes, but I, I would think you'd be very proud of what you did.

Virginia ([11:53](#)):

Um, I worked at Seaview hospital from 1947 until 1957, and I'm very happy that I was there when the cure was founded, um, by Dr. Robitzek it was so a joyous occasion. Uh, the patients were able to take the medication for a certain length of time when they were in the research stage of it. And, um, when they were, their disease was halted and they were improving, their health was improving. Uh, it was such a joy to see so many patients, uh, 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.

Speaker 2 ([13:02](#)):

So it must have been hard, in a way, before the cure, uh, to keep from being depressed and help people die in a dignified way, and so on. Maybe you can talk about that, before the cure...

Virginia ([13:17](#)):

Before the cure, I unfortunately saw many patients pass, not so many of the children, but when I was in training--a nurse's training--and I was doing a, um, a partial training in the morning in Welfare Island and my clinical part of my nurse's training at Seaview, I was on the adult wards and, um, to see the patient's hemorrhage and there was nothing you could do to stop it, and they bled to death. That was very sad and, um, frustrating that there was nothing you could do to help them except to comfort them and make them feel as that they were not alone.

Speaker 2 ([14:13](#)):

It must be hard for you even to talk about that. And I, I can't imagine what it, what it must have been like, but did they help you with training or did it just come naturally to help people that you knew were gonna die and, you know, to, to just face it?

Virginia ([14:32](#)):

Well, at that time, I was so young, I, it was a young woman 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 work 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.

Speaker 2 ([15:24](#)):

Big sister.

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Virginia ([15:27](#)):

Big sister, yes. A big sister. It was a 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, they see them grow up from childhood to adolescence or, or adulthood. Seaview Children's Ward was more or less a, um, boarding school because it was long term. That was a long term illness that had to be treated on site. Uh, the patients', um, parents came to visit them often--some--and there were others who were very far away who didn't have the opportunity to come visit as, as often, but we were their family. The nurses is, and the nurses aides were the fam--the family of the children can find [?].

Virginia ([16:40](#)):

The cure was mostly Streptomycin and Isoniazid, sometimes used--mostly used in together. Um, when it happened, it was like a party. The patients were, um, when it was confirmed that that was the cure, the patients had a party, they banged on pots. They laughed, they talked, they hung out of the windows of the pavilions. And, um, there were little gardens in between the buildings. So the patients were down there talking and laughing and dancing around. It was very joyous. It was a wonderful occasion to see, and, and to be a part of, because that is a part of history.

Virginia ([17:40](#)):

The cure for tuberculosis was discovered by Dr. Robitzek and his staff. It was, it was founded in the laboratories on Seaview grounds. Yes, we, we did a lot of research there. We had to do research with, um, the patients, the patients were the study. The, the symptoms of tuberculosis are: night sweats, a lack of appetite, uh, lack of energy...and a general feeling of being ill, generally. Fatigue all the time. When taking care of the patient, it's very important--it was very important to use a mask, to protect yourself from the patient. Working tuberculosis was a very high risk job. Of course, at the time that I was hired at the age of 16, I didn't understand that, but I am very grateful to the nurses that I work with, that they train me well, and I was able to, um, not contract tuberculosis because it was a very highly infectious disease.

Virginia ([19:24](#)):

And some nurses did contract it, and unfortunately had to be hospitalized at Seaview, in isolation.

Speaker 2 ([19:36](#)):

Did some of them die?

Virginia ([19:38](#)):

I didn't know of any who died, but I do know of several who had to be very careful of their health after, um, contracting tuberculosis. I would say that, um, my experience at Seaview hospital formed my life because I had, um, all positive experiences there. I learned a lot from the nurses that I work with, The Black Angels, and the, some of those women were, uh, like aunts to me. They were friends of my Aunt Edna Sutton Ballard. And, uh, um, I'm very happy to have known, um, Saralina Lot who was my--who grew up to be a, a sorority sister too. She was my big sister, but I came into the sorority through her and Sarah Tennessee Baker.

Virginia ([20:58](#)):

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And, um, the, the black nurses in, um, the Staten Island community were like any other, um, women. They went out to, um, teas, they went to church in the neighborhood, St. Phillips Baptist Church. Uh, many of them belonged to 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.

Speaker 2 ([21:46](#)):

Um, you were telling me about the sorority.

Virginia ([21:49](#)):

I'm gonna get to that. Okay. Sarah, Tennessee baker, after I finished my, um, nurse's 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. There were several members of the sorority who worked at Seaview Hospital: Saralina Lot, um, uh, Sarah Tennessee Baker, Ms. Noble, who was my first nurse in admitting at Seaview...and I'm trying to think... They were members of the New York Urban League, um, and the national of 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, 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).

Notes:

9:10 to 10:25 is glitching for some reason. It won't let me properly edit her lines without moving my cursor around or adding deleted material. I'm going to skip it for now.

"...unfortunately, because of their-- Everybody is more, is susceptible to catching tuberculosis, but some were more susceptible than others. And I've been fortunate."

12:13: could not find the correct spelling of that name or mention of anyone with a similar name after a quick search

13:44: sounds like "conical", left as "clinical" just in case it was just slip of the tongue.