

Curlene Jennings Bennett – Oral History Interview Summary

Curlene Jennings Bennett was born in Columbia, Tennessee, and moved north to Staten Island with her family when she was four years old. She lived with her mother, stepfather, and stepbrother on Van Pelt Avenue in a racially integrated area. Growing up, she was Catholic and attended St. Peter's High School, the only Black student in her class. She states that she always wanted to be a nurse, and acknowledges the lineages within her family of traditional and non-traditional healers. Following this pursuit, at the age of seventeen, she enrolled in Bellevue Nursing School and moved to its living quarters in Manhattan. She recalls exploring the city, including the arts, culture, and jazz she enjoyed in Greenwich Village.

After she graduated, she was offered a job at Seaview Hospital by Annie Eliza Giles, who was also a graduate of Bellevue. The job at Seaview appealed to her because she could be close to family, live at home where she had her own room, and work a predictable shift. She recalls that she had no hesitations about treating patients with tuberculosis, as it had been part of the infection control training she had learned and practiced while at Bellevue; she did, however, dislike administering the medication, Streptomycin, which she says was "like injecting glue." Another detail that Ms. Jennings Bennett shares from her time at Seaview is that of nurses wearing different caps to indicate the school they had attended, a practice that became less and less common throughout the following decades. Ms. Jennings Bennett states that at the time, she was the only Black graduate of Bellevue working at Seaview.

She left Seaview Hospital after only a few years in order to pursue public health nursing. In her words, "as a young nurse, I wanted to get more active," and working with the public in Department of Health clinics appealed to her. She worked as a school nurse, in Well-Baby clinics, in tuberculosis clinics, and in social hygiene clinics, and enjoyed the variety of work that this position provided.

Her experience as a public health nurse, and especially her work in Well-Baby clinics, led to a role working with new mothers in Liberia, where there was a high infant mortality rate. As a nurse at a clinic that was part of the Liberian-American-Swedish Mining Company, in a town called Sanniquellie, she trained mothers in hygiene practices and infant care, even earning congratulations from a local Paramount Chief for the training she provided. During her time there, about four to five years, she gave birth to three children of her own, ultimately returning to the United States when the political situation in Liberia became fraught. She continued to work in nursing throughout her career, often working long hours to provide for her children. Through this work, and the professional and personal connections she cultivated, she went on to help set up and direct systems of care in various prominent hospitals and clinics.

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Ms. Jennings Bennett also discusses her spiritual journey, including her departure from the Catholic faith she was raised with, and learning the teachings of metaphysics, New Thought, and Religious Science. Her conversion played a large part in how she raised her children as well as how she approached nursing and patient care.

This interview was conducted with the help of Ms. Jennings Bennett's daughter, Leah Bennett, who describes in this interview the influence that her mother has had on her understanding of health and healing, her relationship to Africa, and the cultural diversity that was part of her upbringing.

Compiled by Sarah Dziedzic, 2023