

Virginia Allen – Oral History Interview Summary

Virginia Allen was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania during the Great Depression, and grew up in Detroit, Michigan, where her father worked at the Ford Motor Company and her mother was a beautician and artist. After graduating high school at the age of sixteen, Virginia moved to Staten Island to live with her aunt, Edna Sutton Ballard, and follow in her aunt's footsteps by attending nursing school and working at Seaview Hospital, where she was a nurse's aide assigned to the children's ward.

At the time, Seaview Hospital operated as a live-in facility for tuberculosis patients, who were isolated to limit the spread of the disease and treated with fresh air and healthy food. Virginia describes how the nurses and staff at Seaview were trained in isolation technique to prevent contracting the disease. However, the work was still dangerous, and the majority of nurses who worked at the facility—and who were willing to care for patients despite the risk to their own health—were Black. Although the nurses at Seaview did not refer to themselves as such at the time, as Virginia notes, they came to be known as “The Black Angels” for their dutiful care of their patients. The nurses also befriended and nurtured each other; many of the women Virginia worked with at this time became her lifelong friends and mentors, and she lists many of these women by name in her interview.

In 1952, a study on tuberculosis treatment was conducted at Seaview and a cure was discovered. Virginia recalls that “the patients were exhilarated, the staff was happy, everyone was joyous. It was a wonderful time to know that the patients could take medication and not have to be confined to the grounds.” Patients were treated and released, soon eliminating the need for the facility altogether.

Having earned her nursing degree by this time, Virginia moved from Staten Island to Crown Heights in Brooklyn, where she continued to work as nurse, became increasingly involved with the arts community, and worked for the Shirley Chisolm election campaign, meeting Congresswoman Chisolm in the process. In her job working as a nurse and director of training at Brooklyn Jewish Hospital, she was introduced to the unionization efforts of Local 1199, which was endeavoring to unionize nurses at the time. While she at first thought that nurses should be exempt from the union, she eventually changed her mind and even left nursing to work for the union itself because, she says, “it was something different. I was learning something new.” While she worked for the union, she was asked by union leader, Leon Davis, to be the hostess for well-known people when they came to New York. In this capacity, she met some of the most important leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, including Ossie Davis, Martin Luther King, Jr., and his wife, Coretta Scott King.

She eventually moved back to Staten Island and worked as an operating room nurse at Staten Island University Hospital, which offered a more predictable schedule that allowed her to provide more attention to her daughter. As she says, “when you're working for a union, you have to be available early in the mornings, and you may have to work late at night, and cover strike areas. That wasn't good for me.

My daughter came first. I needed to be home with her.” In this position, she was able to ensure that her daughter got a good education—and she ultimately chose nursing as a profession too.

Throughout her life, Virginia notes that she has consistently supported organizations that provide educational and job opportunities, following the model set by her parents, who were “very diligent about education” and aspired to achieve. She is a member—or a founding member of sections on Staten Island—of the New York Urban League, the NAACP, the Lambda Kappa Mu Sorority, the National Council of Negro Women, and the Harriet Tubman Purple Hat Society. She reflects, “If those organizations did not exist, I probably wouldn’t be sitting here talking to you now because I would not have had the opportunities to do all of the things I’ve done, or made any accomplishments.” She has carried those opportunities forward by working to correct curriculum in schools, developing programs that engage students in history, and supporting Black cultural and research organizations.

Of Ms. Allen’s many achievements and awards, she says that being named a Woman of Achievement in 2005 was a particularly special honor “because that is the highest award that any woman receives here on Staten Island, and I cherish it.” Ms. Allen is also locally known for her unique and inspired sense of style, which she says, she learned from her mother. Coming full circle, today Virginia lives in Park Lane Apartments, in the exact same building where she resided many years ago when she worked as a nurse’s aide for Seaview Hospital.