

Nursing Ambassador to the World

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One of the most inspiring yet little-known life stories of a minority nursing pioneer is that of U.S. Public Health Service nurse Mary Lee Mills, MSN, RN, MPH, CNM. Now 96 years old, Mills was born in 1912 and raised outside Watha, an impoverished rural area in North Carolina. She is one of 11 children and the granddaughter of slaves. Through education and determination Mills achieved an international nursing career that brought health and hope to medically underserved people around the world.

She received her early learning in a one-teacher schoolhouse in the days when racial segregation was the law of the land and educational opportunities for African American children in rural North Carolina were deplorable. Mills was an exceptional student and completed the limited public schooling that was available to her as a young black female in the early part of the 20th century in the Jim Crow south. During the height of the Great Depression, Mills made her way to Durham, N.C., where in 1934 she graduated from the Lincoln Hospital School of Nursing and became a registered nurse. She worked as a public health nurse and then in advanced practice as a nurse-midwife while she completed her education. Mills earned a certificate in public health nursing from the Medical College of Virginia, a certificate in midwifery from the Lobenstein School of Midwifery in New York City, a bachelor's and master's degree in nursing from New York University and a graduate certificate in health care administration from George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

In 1946, Mills returned to North Carolina to direct the public health nursing certificate program at historically black North Carolina College (now North Carolina Central University) in Durham. That same year, she was commissioned as an officer in the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS).

Going Global

Mary Mills began her distinguished career in global and transcultural nursing in February 1946, when she joined the Office of International Health and was assigned to the USPHS mission in Monrovia, Liberia. While in Liberia, she created some of that country's first health education campaigns, initiated a national public health library and advocated for legislation to strengthen nursing as a profession. A 1956 article in the American Journal of Nursing described Mills' work in Liberia this way:

“From 1946 until 1952 she served as chief nursing officer for the USPHS in Liberia, West Africa. In addition to trips into the interior with her colleagues to set up immunization stations and health centers, she helped organize and establish the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial Children's Ward at the government hospital in Monrovia and she was instrumental in organizing the Tubman National School of Nursing. Liberia invested her as Knight Official of the Liberian Humane Order of African Redemption.”

After a short period back in the U.S. for study, rest and family visits, Mills—who had been promoted from the USPHS rank of major to that of lieutenant colonel, then colonel and finally captain—received her next international assignment, to Beirut, Lebanon, in January 1952.

On her way from North Carolina to the Middle East, she represented the United States at conferences of the International Council of Nurses and the World Health Organization. In Beirut, CAPT Mills worked hard to establish Lebanon's first school of nursing. These efforts earned her the Order of the Cedars, one of that country's highest awards for service. A nursing dormitory at the school was named in her honor.

Throughout her 20-year career with the Office of International Health, CAPT Mills was an ambassador of good will representing North Carolina and the United States around the globe. In addition to her work in Liberia and Lebanon, she provided health education, nursing care and midwifery services to countless individuals and families in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Chad. In those countries, Mills worked on small pox and malaria eradication campaigns, sanitation, hygiene, nutrition, health education programs and the establishment of maternal-child health clinics. She is fluent in four languages: Arabic, French, Cambodian, and African dialects.

Additionally, she was instrumental in initiating or expanding schools of nursing in all of these countries. Leaders of every nation in which she worked bestowed honors and awards on her for her untiring efforts to improve the quality of life and health for all citizens of the world.

Accolades at Home

In 1966, CAPT Mills returned permanently to the United States and took a job with the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW), the predecessor of today's Department of Health and Human Services. In her new position as nursing consultant in the migrant health program, she provided political, policy and program advice about migrant worker health care and other public health issues to the secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, a Cabinet member advising the president.

In this capacity, she went to Finland, Germany and Denmark to study their national health care systems and bring back ideas that might be put to use in the United States. She also represented the U.S. at international nursing, midwifery and public health conferences in Mexico, Canada, Germany, Australia, Italy and Sweden.

In addition, Mills has been an active member and officer of many professional associations, including the American College of Nurse-Midwives, the National League for Nursing, the Frontier Nursing Service, the American Public Health Association, the American Nurses Association, the North Carolina Nurses Association (District 11) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

During her 10 years at HEW, Mills received many awards honoring her contributions to improving public health at both the national and international levels. These honors include a USPHS Distinguished Service Award, Princeton University's Rockefeller Public Service Award, the American Nurses Association's Mary Mahoney Award and North Carolina's highest honor, the Long Leaf Pine Award. She was awarded an honorary doctor of science degree from Tuskegee University and an honorary doctor of laws degree from Seton Hall University.

Mills retired from government service in 1976 to her beloved Pender County, North Carolina. She is now in poor health, yet she remains an active volunteer in several local service organizations that help others and advance nursing. Although her story is summarized briefly in Dr. M. Elizabeth Carnegie's classic history book *The Path*

We Tread: Blacks in Nursing Worldwide, her contributions to the nursing profession are still relatively unknown. Mary Mills is an extraordinary role model who overcame barriers of race, gender, class and geography to become an international leader in nursing and an outstanding humanitarian. Her life story is an inspiration to all nurses to expand our horizons and recognize that we can be of service not just at home but to people all over the world.