
Gwendolyn Cooper Jones Parham, RN, BSN, MSN

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I was born Gwendolyn Melba Cooper to Terry and Elizabeth Cooper on September 27, 1937, in Smithfield, North Carolina. My father was a Black Seminole Indian, which means that his father was a Seminole Indian and his mother was an African American. He was born in Marianna, Florida, and lived there on an Indian reservation until he was fourteen years old. He and his father migrated to North Carolina where he met my mother, who was born in Raleigh. They were married in 1929 and eleven children were born to this union. My father worked for the railroad in various capacities and my mother was a housewife. They both completed the eighth grade.

When I was a preschooler my mother and father moved from Smithfield to Wilson. My mother was ill at the time and had two other smaller children and four older ones. I did not make the move, as I was left with close family friends who were also my godparents. They reared me as their only child until I graduated from Johnston County Training School in 1955. I was a very active student, maintaining a high scholastic average throughout my elementary, junior high, and senior school years.

My many extracurricular activities included the following: Singing in the school chorus, participating in the 4-H Club, Girl Scouts of America, Dance Group, Honor Society, Journalism Club, Student Council, School Band, Junior Varsity Basketball Team, Spanish Club, and the Yearbook Committee. I was also the Senior Class President and the salutatorian. As you can see, my secondary school years were carefree, happy, and gratifying. Little did I know that was soon to change.

I entered Lincoln Hospital School of Nursing in September 1955. I soon had many rude awakenings. There were many first experiences for me. For example, I was in a city where I learned about the existence of such things as illicit drug use, homosexuality, and civil rights unrest. I had been protected from most negative social ills. I was not exposed to sickness except for when I had strep throat and a kidney infection, which sent me to Duke Hospital for treatment.

My strongest attraction to nursing was the recruitment advertisements about the Army Nurse Corps that I had seen in school. I liked the uniforms and I was fascinated by the possibility of being a flight nurse. Consequently, nursing became my choice as I viewed this profession as a route to realizing my dream of becoming a flight attendant.

As a pre-clinical nursing student I perceived my first encounters with the instructors and superiors to be harsh, unfriendly, and punitive. For the first time in my life I felt uncomfortable in a school setting. However, I did what was required of me and successfully completed the pre-clinical period.

The upper-class students were very supportive and friendly, and I am very grateful to my big sister Cassie Nixon for her sensitive and caring personality. The second year at Lincoln took a new direction for me. I had overcome my fears and decided that I could and would continue on my quest to become a nurse (I really didn't have any other choice). The instructors and hospital nurses expected us to perform nursing care without hesitation or errors. Thus, it was imperative that I pay careful attention to my classroom theory and clinical laboratory procedures so that I could competently apply the information in the clinical practice setting. We were held accountable for being prepared, on time, and taking responsibility for our actions. These requirements prepared me for entry into the world of professional nursing as I embarked on my first job assignment. Following my graduation in 1958 I went to work at Duke Hospital. I was placed on a previously segregated ward housing all-White thoracic and general surgery patients. There, my rude awakenings continued, as I was the only "Colored" graduate nurse assigned to that unit. It was clearly communicated to me by the head nurse that I was not wanted and if I did not pass the state board exams I would not be allowed to stay. There were two other new graduates (Caucasians) who came at the same time but were treated with more dignity than I was. One failed the exam; and the other one and I passed. My career at Duke was short-lived as I got married in 1959 and in 1960 gave birth to my first child, Jennifer. I then became a stay-at-home mom. By the time I was ready to return to work, I realized that I was pregnant with my second daughter, Lori, who was born in 1962. With two small children, I decided that a school schedule was better for me than juggling a work schedule. I entered North Carolina College (now NCCU) in 1964 to matriculate in the bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) program for registered nurses. While I was there I was able to recapture the joy of going to school. Upon completion of the requirements for the BSN in 1968, I was hired by Durham Technical Institute as a nursing instructor, which launched my career as a nurse educator.

Following is my chronology of my places of employment as well as my responsibilities for each position held:

1958-1960: Duke Hospital, staff nurse and evening charge nurse on Thoracic and General Surgery ward. There I was responsible for providing pre- and post-operative care to surgical patients encountering the preoperative experience. I was also responsible for directing the care given by my team.

1968-1970: Durham Technical Institute (now Durham Technical Community College), instructor. I implemented a Nursing Assistant Program, which I developed and taught, providing many young men and women with the opportunity to acquire marketable skills to become self-sufficient. I also coordinated their job placement with Duke and Watts Hospitals, the Public Health Department, and other community health agencies.

1970-1972: Lincoln Community Health Center, family care nurse. My responsibilities included assisting the chief medical administrator, clinical administrator, and nursing administrator with the organization of implementation of health-care delivery to the first clients that were registered in the center. I also conducted classes that trained the first family care health aids for the center and supervised their work in the community.

1972-1998: North Carolina Central University. I advanced from the rank of instructor to that of a tenured assistant professor and assistant chairperson of the Department of Nursing. My responsibilities included curriculum development, research, and teaching many of the courses in the nursing major. My specialty was medical and surgical nursing, but I also enjoyed teaching the basic courses as well as courses in gerontology, research, leadership, and cultural diversity in nursing. Additionally, I functioned in many roles of leadership in the Department of Nursing as well as at the greater university. For example, I have represented the department on several occasions at the National League for Nursing, the North Carolina Board of Nursing, and the Board of Governors of the University of North Carolina system by collaborating on the nursing curriculum and the status of the Department of Nursing regarding the program performance and accreditation issues.

Professional affiliations of which I am proud to include the American Nurses Association, National League for Nursing, National Black Nurses Association, North Carolina Nurses Association, Sigma Theta Tau Sorority (Duke University chapter), and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority (Durham Alumnae chapter).

My educational background is as follows:

Basic nursing diploma: Lincoln Hospital School of Nursing, 1958

Baccalaureate degree, BSN: North Carolina College (now North Carolina Central University or NCCU), 1968

Master's degree, MSN: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1977

Pre-doctoral studies: North Carolina State University at Raleigh, North Carolina 1978-1979

Numerous continuing education Certificates at the local, state, and national levels.

I have been recognized by NCCU for my teaching excellence as well as for my contributions to the university, such as serving as a university marshal for many years and functioning in roles of leadership in the Faculty Senate.

As I reflect on my professional career, I am grateful to Lincoln Hospital School of Nursing for laying the foundation upon which I was able to grow professional in so many ways. This foundation has led to my ability to persevere in difficult situations, to problem solve, and to function in a variety of professional settings with competence and confidence. What I think made Lincoln unique was the presence of strong role models who set high standards of excellence and who were good examples of professionalism. It is with pride that I say I am a graduate of Lincoln Hospital School of Nursing.

My greatest honors have been the meritorious evaluations given to me by my students and the university, as well as the verbal expressions of respect and thanks from my former students.

Currently I reside in Richmond, Virginia. Since my retirement in 1998 I have enjoyed singing in my church choir (Ebenezer Baptist Church), traveling throughout the United States, Europe, Africa, China, Asia, Turkey, and many Caribbean Islands, playing golf, and spending time with family.