
Mary Lee Richardson Baldwin, RN '66, BSN, MPHA

From the book "Voices" by Dr. Evelyn Wicker

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I was born to a teenage mom and raised by my maternal aunt and an uncle who at eighty-eight years old still sneaks and chews (Levi Garrett) tobacco. From this beginning, raised on a dirt road joining farms, I grew up with four uncles, two aunts, my sister Rosetta, and a total of nineteen cousins, all of us participating in killing hogs, burning tobacco, picking cotton, and cucumbers, pulling corn, and going to church.

My first official job was driving a school bus forty-five miles round trip because there was no Black school for us to attend. I ended up being the only bus driver that wrecked her bus when a wasp went up my dress and I jumped a ditch and ended up in a cornfield. Johnston County Memorial Hospital afforded me the opportunity to enter nursing school after winning a county essay on "Why I Wanted To Continue My Education." A three-year education scholarship was paid as long as my grades were above average.

During my developmental years there was a sense of family, church, community, and a strong work ethic from strong personalities that were there to guide me and pay close attention to my life. From these fertilizing roots, I embarked on my lifelong journey of trying to determine who I would become. As the now ninety-year-old mother/aunt would say to me when she left me on the stoop at Lincoln Hospital School of Nursing, "Do your best because you don't know who is watching you and if you can't do what you are supposed to do YOU can come home and burn tobacco!" I prayed at that moment, "Please God, don't let me go back to that life."

We were poor in money but rich in love and tradition. This tradition kept me humble and true to being the best I could be. Lincoln provided me with friends for a lifetime. I entered with the Class of 1966. We started with twenty-two students but there were only eight by the end of the first semester: Dellamar Davis, Linda Loftin Woodson, Rebecca Mitchell Carter, Pauline Langston Edwards, Loretta Fleteau Chestnut, Alice Jean McClain, and Sarah O'Leone Jinwright. A bond developed among us very early. We called ourselves the "Sensational Eight" and continue to meet every other year some place on the east coast.

Lincoln taught me that being a nurse required the skills of a follower, a leader, and a stickler for details as well as being able to recognize quality care and the importance of meeting patients where they were. We cared for poor patients that could not be cared for on the other side of the tracks. I saw doctors and nurses that looked like me. I also recognized the type of nurse that I wanted to pattern myself after and certainly there were some nurses that had issues. As a student I worked from 11:00 p.m. to 6:30 a.m. then would go to Pharmacology class at 7:00 a.m., followed by medical/surgical class, then go to bed, get up and study for a few hours, then back to work at 10:45 p.m. (Burning tobacco didn't look so bad.) But through it all, perseverance, professionalism, crying, and prayer prepared me for the world outside of my Lincoln tradition.

After leaving Lincoln, I went to work in a tertiary hospital. It brought on a world I had almost forgotten, that is, being told I was not qualified because I didn't have a degree. This, when I saw White nurses that also did not have degrees being hired in leadership roles. So, with my husband's support, I obtained a BSN degree and was appointed to a head nurse position. I was ready. One morning, I was approached by the nursing supervisor and informed that a physician had written a letter stating that I needed to be taken off the floor and made a head nurse. I was not sure what he wanted in a head nurse. The supervisor then said, "Well, we can't keep a charge nurse so we thought we would try a Black nurse." My response was, "You just get out of my way and I will show you what a Lincoln Hospital nurse can do." About three years later the nursing director of the hospital (a Lincoln nurse) hired me as the first Black supervisor of Ambulatory Care (all public clinics).

It was God's grace through prayer that allowed me to complete a BSN and a master's in public health. When I tried to enter the BSN program at North Carolina Central University in Durham, North Carolina, my SAT scores were not high enough, so I called the chairman, Helen Miller, and she said, "Girl come on down and sign up for class." I was determined not to disappoint her. I took the MSAT and again I did not meet requirements. This time I talked with Professor Moses Carey, and he had me sign up for nine hours, and I passed all courses. Wow, what an accomplishment for someone from Middlesex, North Carolina.

My struggles at the tertiary medical center continued as other Black nurses realized that there was a pattern of Black nurses needing degrees to achieve leadership positions. We had city rallies, gained support from the Durham NAACP, and established the Concerned Black Nurses Committee. A national committee was appointed and it uncovered some problems, but the administration chose to diffuse our efforts by eliminating positions.

Through all of these struggles, this Lincoln Hospital School of Nursing graduate was hired to return to the grounds where she started—Lincoln Community Health Center (where Lincoln Hospital once stood). I returned to oversee the nursing care and monitor the quality of care provided. For twenty-one years I provided care to the uninsured and underserved. During those years, my husband and I had to raise two small grandchildren. From those fertilizing roots, I had to give back and help save the people that I love very much.

What a journey. I have networked with the state nurses associations, the community, the National Black Nurses Association, formed the prostate support group and breast health support group at Lincoln Community Health Center, mentored nurses, and encouraged those who were interested in the profession to follow their dreams. This profession has taught me to be qualified through formal knowledge but also to be truthful and straightforward in my dealings with others. Nurses want leaders to be open, fair, caring, and goal oriented.

Thanks for the opportunity to share my journey. I wish to thank all those persons that participated in my journey, and I hope that I have given back in some way. Thanks to the authors that had the vision to document these facts.