

Angels at my shoulder

The story of how a 19 year-old girl from Guyana reached top jobs in NHS nursing.

The “angels” who helped her on the way remain strong in the memory of 82 year old Lynette Richards-Lorde as she looks back on a successful 33 year career in nursing and management.

It all began in 1959 when as a young girl she began nurse training at Musgrove Park in Somerset. Back home she had been told that England was the place to get the best nurse training so she saved from her earnings in the Ministry of Health to pay for herself and her sister Veronica to sail over to start a new life.

“Matron sent a car to collect me from the station at Taunton and told me she was to be my parent now and would be looking after me.”

Veronica went to train as a nursing auxiliary in Oxford and for the next few years Lynette “got on with what she had to do” until one day she was summoned to matron’s office where an important looking letter awaited her. It was an invitation to represent Guyana at a royal garden party for commonwealth students. “It was quite a big thing” she said. “And in the same year I completed my SRN and was awarded best practical nurse of the year.”

She then undertook midwifery training in Cheltenham and Birmingham before going home for a while and then returning to England where she married and had her daughter Ruth.



Lynette and Veronica at the start of their new lives

She returned to work as a community midwife in Redhill. There was no money for courses, so she paid herself for training at the Royal College of Midwives and became a teaching midwife in Croydon.

“All these things I can do – but will they accept a black person?”

Eager for change

“I started to see there were things that needed to be done and I suggested trying new ways but the reaction was mostly that people were happy as they were. I wanted to be a nursing officer and at my first interview they asked me questions about reports I did not know anything about. They said afterwards they could see I had potential but I should widen my knowledge and ask to share information. It opened my eyes.”

“When I got my first management post as a nursing officer in Greenwich I had a marvellous teacher. That was another angel that I met. She taught me how to manage the service. After four years I got itchy feet and I saw a senior nursing officer post advertised in Wandsworth. I thought ‘all these things I can do – but will they accept a black person?’ Just before the closing date I took courage and went to see the Divisional Nursing Officer – she told me I was just the person because I had ideas and experience. I did not expect to succeed but I performed at interview, got the job and put my heart and soul into it.”

Another angel

At Wandsworth Lynette was responsible for supervising all the midwives and services at several hospitals. After six months her boss left to get married and “another angel came along” and suggested more management training as she took on a three month “acting up” role at the end of which she had impressed with what she had done and was interviewed and appointed Divisional Nursing Officer – the first black nurse to reach such a position. She was advisor to the district on midwifery and women’s services and responsible for commissioning a new unit and closing three others, creating a service which was regarded as a centre of excellence, resulting in invitations to talk to government select committees and an exchange visit to Oklahoma District Hospital.

Another re-organisation followed, when Lynette stepped up to being Director of Nursing and Midwifery for hospital and community services and later was promoted to Unit General Manager for all women and children’s services.

Would she do it all again? “Oh gosh, yes. The job I loved the best was working on the district, making friends with lots of people. To me it was just a joy to deliver a healthy baby to happy families. In all the jobs I have done since it was about developing other people and providing them with the teaching and training that would make sure they got what they deserved.”

After retirement Lynette took on advisory and voluntary roles, including representing the UK at Strasbourg on a European committee dealing with inequalities in health and she is still doing voluntary work as a community champion for Diabetes UK.

But it’s the angels on the way that she remembers. “I had a lot of angels helping me” she said. People were so kind to me.”

And just one more story: Lynette delivered a baby girl and as she left the house the father asked her name, and decided to call his new daughter after her. Many years later, at a reunion she met Lynette again. A reminder of a time that is still a happy memory.
Does your branch have a member whose life story would interest all our membership? We would be pleased to share it.

Would she do it all again?
“Oh gosh yes.”



*Nurse manager Lynette:
the first black nurse to reach
Divisional Nursing Officer*