



# A treasured elder...

## Cynthia Bennett McCalla

Centenarian RN sees caregiving from both sides

Treasure  
Our  
Elders

The irony of a dedicated career nurse being cared for by other dedicated career nurses is not lost on 100-year-old Cynthia McCalla. Of course, very little escapes the notice of this remarkable woman who quite literally dedicated her life to others.

"I'm very pleased with my life," McCalla said in a quiet and refined British-Jamaican accent. "Whatever I planned to do and wanted to do I worked for and accomplished."

McCalla was born December 4, 1904, the only child of Ralph and Susan Bennett, in Kingston, Jamaica. The country was then a British colony and McCalla's father was a policeman, or "mounted orderly," as they were known. From the very beginning, the couple emphasized education for their daughter. After completing the Jamaican equivalent of high school, McCalla was sent off to New York City to live with her cousin, an accomplished dressmaker. Not yet age 20, McCalla enrolled in the nursing program at the 300-bed Harlem Hospital. "We lived there, worked there and went to school there. We were paid \$20 a month, which I sent home to my parents."

### Public health pioneer

While taking a three-month training at Columbia University, McCalla found her passion — the still fairly new field of public health. She graduated from the RN program in 1927 (she would later earn a Bachelor of Science in Nursing), was licensed in New York the next year and soon went to work for the Community Services Society, a privately-funded charitable organization. McCalla and four other nurses would fan out and go door-to-door through the slums of south Harlem to help newly-arrived immigrants and others understand the basics of good hygiene and nutrition. "The diphtheria antitoxin had just been invented, but we had no antibiotics. We saw a lot of measles and many died from pneumonia," McCalla recalled.

### Back home

McCalla hadn't seen her parents in almost nine years when she returned to



### Career nurse:

McCalla was a student nurse at Harlem Hospital in 1924. Below, as part of her 1927 graduating class.



Jamaica for an extended visit in 1933. Though not yet 30, she had since become a U.S. citizen and an accomplished nurse during a time when women of color were barred from entering many professions. Returning to New York, she later met George Archer McCalla, a fellow Jamaican who dreamed of becoming a barrister and returning to Jamaica to practice law. "We met at a dinner party and I knew he was the man I wanted," McCalla said with a shy smile and laugh. "I looked up and said to him, 'I would like to have a boyfriend like you.'" The two were married in New York's famous Church of the Transfiguration ("The Little Church Around the Corner") in 1935, and soon George was off to London to study law while Cynthia stayed behind in New York. It was the first of many extended periods of separation for the couple, but their marriage would endure for 62 years until his death in 1997.

By the early 1960's, McCalla's nursing career was winding down when she again traveled to Jamaica to care for her ailing 88-year-old mother, who died six years later. McCalla then headed back to New York ("We had to pay the mortgage and I could make much more money in New York than in Jamaica."), this time living in Queens and serving as the hospital's head nurse. She would again return to Jamaica in 1994 — at age 90 — to care for her dying husband. Upon his death she

relocated to Ocala, and in 2000, to the immaculately clean Life Care Center of Ocala, where her niece, Pauline Neill, visits every day and volunteers twice a week.

### Looking back

McCalla spends her days painting, playing cards, dominoes and bingo and socializing with fellow patients and staff. She is impressed with the quality of care and dedication she sees among the nursing staff at Life Care Center. "So much has changed since I was a nurse, but the basic call and foundation of nursing hasn't changed at all," she said with unquestioned authority. "When you walk into the room, you should put the patient at ease with a smile and a 'good morning.' A good nurse treats people with kindness, gentleness, patience and love. Nobody wants to see a grumpy or hard face."

A world traveler, a pioneer nurse, a dedicated wife, a career woman before the term was even invented. FHCA honors Cynthia Bennett McCalla and treasures her many contributions to our nation.

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