

Celebrating Black nurses this February and beyond



This February marks the 10th anniversary of Black History Month in Canada. It's a time to reflect not only on the contribution Black Canadians have made to this country but also on the contribution Black nurses have made to the profession.

Tracing the history of nursing, it's clear the 1940s was a decade of great change for Black nurses. Employment barriers for women were down because of the exodus of young men to the frontlines of the war. However, Black women who wanted to become nurses were struggling for equal opportunities to work in health care.

Bernice Redmon, a Toronto native, was one of those nurses. Redmon wanted to become a nurse but was refused entry to nursing schools in Canada. Instead, she went to St. Phillip Hospital Medical College in Virginia, U.S.A. and graduated with her nursing diploma in 1945. When she returned to Canada that same year, she became the first Black nurse allowed to practise in public health after getting a job at the Nova Scotia Department of Health. She went on to become the first Black woman appointed to the Victorian Order of Nurses in Canada.

Ruth Bailey, also from Toronto, Gwen Barton, from Halifax, and Marissa Scott, from Owen Sound, were among an increasing number of Black women during the 40s who were accepted to nursing schools as a result of tremendous pressure from trade unions and church groups to accept Black students. Scott became the first Black person to graduate and practise as a nurse in Ontario in 1950.

These women blazed a trail for thousands of Black nurses practising today. And as we celebrate their accomplishments and honour their perseverance, we reflect on

their hard-fought battle and what it means for our profession.

Whenever I speak to nurses, I am always proud to look out at the crowd and see so much diversity. And it's not just Black nurses I see; it's nurses from all walks of life. That cultural diversity is thanks to people like Redmon, Bailey, Barton and Scott. It's thanks to the hundreds of women and men who have faced adversity and have acknowledged how important it is to stand up for equality in nursing.

When Jean Augustine, the first Black woman elected to Parliament, introduced a motion to the House of Commons in 1996

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to recognize February as Black History Month, she wanted the people of Canada to "take note of the important contribution of Black Canadians to the settlement, growth and development of Canada, the diversity of the Black community in Canada, and its importance to the history of this country."

I'm proud to continue that tradition as your president and as the second Black African Canadian to hold that title in RNAO's 80-year history.

This February I will celebrate and applaud the tremendous work and commitment of groups like the Barbados Registered Nurses Association, the Grenada Nurses Association, the University of the West Indies Graduate Nurses Association, the Eritrean Canadian Nurses Association, the Canadian Black Nurses Association, and

the dozens of other groups that are also continuing the tradition by ensuring Black nurses have the supports they need to become leaders in health care.

I will also celebrate the emergence of new groups such as the Black Nurses Network (BNN). I was honoured to give the keynote address at BNN's Annual Dinner and Dance in Toronto in December. It's so inspiring to see a group that is doing so much to strengthen networking and unity among Black nurses, supporting one another's achievements and growth through mentorship.

As one of BNN's mentors, I remind Black nurses of the challenges of our predecessors, and urge them to celebrate the contributions of Black nurses every minute, every hour, and every day.

In November I was honoured to receive the *Jocelyn Hezekiah Award for Leadership on the World Stage* from the Centre for Equity in Health and Society. This recognition of my work to make RNAO and the profession more inclusive is my inspiration to continue mentoring Black nurses and nurses of all cultural backgrounds. It's also my inspiration to continue RNAO's important work on the *Embracing Diversity Project*, which was launched the first year of my presidency and continues to build policies that give all nurses of all cultural backgrounds the opportunity to participate fully in nursing.

I share these awards with Redmon, Bailey, Barton and Scott, and all nurses who have fought for equality in our profession. It's hard to imagine where we might be today without these tremendous women shaping the future. And it's hard to imagine where we might be tomorrow without the Black nurses of today doing the same.

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IS PRESIDENT OF RNAO.**