



The Foundation for the History of Women in Medicine

The Renaissance Woman in Medicine Oral History Project



Gene-Ann Polk, MD
Foundation Board Member Emeritus
Professor Emerita, Clinical Pediatrics,
Columbia University

Interview Profile

This three-session interview with pediatrician, Dr. Gene-Ann Polk (b. 3 October 1926, Roselle, New Jersey) is conducted in December of 2014 (total duration 5 hours 30 minutes). From 1953 to 1994, Dr. Polk worked at Harlem Hospital in New York City, as well as serving other roles in the early part of her career. At Harlem Hospital, her career included roles as a physician and administrator. In 1962, when Harlem Hospital was affiliated with Columbia University, she became joined the Columbia faculty and retired as a professor Emerita. Dr. Polk joined the Board of the Foundation for the History of Women in Medicine in 2006. She is now Board Member emeritus. The interview is conducted at Dr. Polk's home in Lafayette Hill, Pennsylvania. Tacey A. Rosolowski, Ph.D. is the interviewer.¹ Dr. Polk's daughter, Carol Penn, is present during two of the interview sessions and videotapes them. Carol Penn and Dr. Polk's husband, Edwin C. Horne, are present during part of the third session.

Dr. Polk received her BA from Oberlin College in 1948 and her MD from Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1952. From 1952 to 1953 she was an intern at Sydenham Hospital, New York. She completed her Pediatric Residency at Harlem Hospital during 1953 to 1955. In 1968 she earned a Masters in Public Health from Columbia University. Dr. Polk worked in private practice and in city and county-based health care clinics as well as at Harlem Hospital. She has been active in mentoring young black women into the medical professional and preserving the history of the contributions of black women to medicine.

While at Harlem Hospital, Dr. Polk pioneered research on the treatment of neonatal drug addiction and established a neonatal transfusion program. As she rose to leadership positions - Director of Pediatric Ambulatory Care, Acting Director of Pediatrics, and Director of Ambulatory Care Services—Dr. Polk had increasing impact on the delivery of care within the hospital and the network of clinics she established. She has received awards from the Susan Smith McKinney Steward Medical Society and The United Negro College Fund.

In this interview, Dr. Polk sketches her entry into medicine and her long career caring for children and strengthening the care delivery systems in and around Harlem Hospital. She describes growing up as the “privileged” daughter of a physician in a small town, sharing

¹¹ Dr. Polk was interviewed for the Drexel University Legacy Project in 2003. Interview is available via the Archives.

observations about race and gender in Post-War America and the fifties. She talks about her drive to practice medicine and how she acted on this commitment from the beginning of her residency at Harlem Hospital. She sketches the evolution of her career with the hospital and her many contributions to care delivery. This interview provides a portrait of a woman with enormous energy, drive, and humor. Dr. Polk is recovering from a long illness during this interview. Her voice weakens at some points and she must take frequent breaks.

Chapter Summaries

Note 1: Time codes for chapters

Approximate time codes are indicated for the beginnings of chapters. A time code with a plus sign following it ([time stamp]+) indicates that the chapter begins some short time after the indicated time code. Conversely, a minus sign following the time stamp indicates it begins shortly before that position in the audio file.

Note 2: Priority Content

The Chapter Summaries include notes on the following priority topics:

- Leadership issues
- Mentoring
- Race/gender/racism/sexism
- Descriptions of situations for women in medicine
- Inspiring stories

A list of the priority issues present in a chapter appear after the chapter title. When appropriate, a time stamp is included to indicate the approximate location of the content. Chapter summaries may also include more detail on the content.

Interview Session One: 8 December 2014, duration--1:01

Session One Interview Identifier

[00:00.00]

Chapter One

A Privileged Upbringing in a Small Town

[00:01:24]-

In this chapter, Dr. Polk talks about her family and early years growing up in Roselle, New Jersey. She explains that she was born at home, the second in a family of four girls born to Charles C. Polk, MD, a general practitioner, and Olive Bond Polk. (Sisters: Carolyn, Gene-Ann, Barbara, Josephine.) She discusses the small-town feel of Roselle and the close, home centered family in which she was raised. She explains the effect of race at the time. She notes that her father served the small black populations in Roselle and in nearby towns. She recalls that race was not an important factor in schools, but recalls instances of negative comments in

town. She also recalls that her parents taught her how to handle these comments. Overall, she explains, she was raised in a very positive environment of diversity, with many advantages, financially and culturally, that she would not realize until she got older.

Chapter 2 **Memories of a Physician Father**

[00:09:24]+

Here Dr. Polk recalls her father's role as a physician, which she easily observed since he had his office in their home and her mother was the "office girl." She explains that his patients often paid in goods during the Depression. Her father served both black and white patients, particularly Italian families and that was how she learned to make dandelion wine. She also recalls her father saving money (quarters at a time) for her education and that of her older sister. Dr. Polk talks about making house calls with her father as a girl; she also joined his practice after receiving her MD (between 1955 and 1962/3). She tells stories of practicing with him.

Chapter 3 **A Role-Model Mother**

[00:16:06]-

Mentoring

Dr. Polk talks about the influence of her mother, who was very interested in cultural activities and community action. Under her mother's influence, Dr. Polk took music lessons and attended theater and classical music events. She recalls that her mother became a Girl Scout leader in order to start a troupe for black girls. She was active in the family's church. She also entertained her daughters' friends, creating a "drawing spot" at the Polk home. Her mother was an "exceptional person," she recalls, and talks about the "social work" her mother did mentoring young people. She also served on many boards of organizations and received the New Jersey Mother of the Year Award in 1976. Dr. Polk talks about the extra-curricular activities she took part in.

Chapter 4 **A "Year of Comfort" at Howard University**

[00:21:38]-

Race/gender/racism/sexism

Dr. Polk begins this chapter by talking about her extracurricular activities, then discusses her college education. Though she first thought she'd be a musician, she made the decision not to follow that path. She talks about her decision to attend Howard University despite her parents' wish that she go to Oberlin College to focus on music. She explains the effect that being in a black setting had on her older sister and that she wanted that social experience herself. She spent a year (1944/'45) enjoying the "complete experience" that Howard provided as well as the relief from constantly thinking about race. She then notes that she needed more stimulation, which prompted her to transfer to Oberlin.

Chapter 5 **An Extraordinary Godmother**

[00:30:54]

Mentoring
Race/gender/racism/sexism
Inspiring stories

Here Dr. Polk talks about her godmother, Myra Smyth Kearse, MD, who was the only woman in her class at Howard Medical School when she received her degree in 1925. She explains how Dr. Kearse came to be her godmother and describes her as a “little lady with a whole lot of energy and stamina.” She tells an anecdote about how Dr. Kearse stood up against racial inequity. She notes that Dr. Kearse was an important role model.

Chapter 6 **Oberlin College: Very Different From Howard University**

[00:33:53]+

Inspiring stories: [00:41:44]

In this chapter, Dr. Polk talks about her adjustment to Oberlin College after the protected environment of Howard University. She also explains the courses she took as a chemistry pre-medical student and notes that she “likes to be challenged” and enjoyed doing well in classes that women usually didn’t take. She shares some stories about the atmosphere for a black student at Oberlin. She also clarifies that she had decided to be a physician in 11th grade. She recalls discouraging comments made: even her mother asked, “Are you sure,” pointing out the social and family sacrifices she felt Dr. Kearse had been required to make for her career. Dr. Polk recalls her determination in the face of these comments.

Chapter 7 **Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania: A Protected Environment**

[00:45:50]

Mentoring
Situation for women
Race/gender/racism/sexism
Inspiring stories

In this chapter Dr. Polk explains her process of applying to medical school and her selection of the Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. She then talks about the unique atmosphere at the Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania (MD conferred 1952). She first explains the commitment to bringing women into the medical profession. She notes that she was one of only four black women in her class and recalls only one black professor. She explains that she was ill several times during medical school and recalls how driven she was to make up for the time lost as a result.

Chapter 8
Internship and Residency, a Marriage, and a New Connection with Harlem Hospital
[00:53:18]+

Dr. Polk explains that she got engaged during her fourth year of medical school to Edwin C. Horne, an oral surgeon and he was going to Harlem to advance his career. Dr. Polk recalls being “scared” by the Harlem Hospital Emergency Room. (She would do her Pediatric Residency at Harlem Hospital in '53 – '55.) She chose to do her Rotating Residency at Sydenham Hospital in New York, '52-'53. She briefly compares Sydenham and Harlem Hospitals and explains that Sydenham was designated as a hospital where black physicians could admit their private patients (as opposed to turning them over to a white doctor for referral and to take over their care). Dr. Polk also notes that she did her rotating internship at Sydenham and decided to focus on pediatrics.

Session Two: 9 December 2014, 1:59

Session Two Interview Identifier

Chapter Nine
A Memory of “Raw Racism”
[00:00:00]+

Racism
Inspiring stories [00:06:37]+

In this chapter Dr. Polk describes a dramatic brush with racism at the age of about seven that still remains with her. It occurred during one of the yearly trips to North Carolina she took with her family to see her grandparents. Dr. Polk describes the challenges for black Americans who traveled in the South at that time. She explains the “Green Book,” a guide listing accommodations and facilities that blacks could use in the South. She describes the experience she had when her parents stopped for gas and to use the rest room. Dr. Polk says that her parents kept her and her sisters very protected from racism and also gave them tools to deal with all kinds of challenges. They also instilled a strong work ethic, and this was very important in her own life.

Chapter 10
A Portrait of Harlem
[00:09:31]+

Dr. Polk begins this chapter by noting that she was the only black female on staff when she began her residency at Harlem Hospital. In response to a question, she then gives a brief overview of the history of Harlem, where she spent a great deal of her professional life. She explains that Harlem was first a summer getaway spot for well-to-do whites from New York. It shifted racially in the early 1900s until it was almost completely black by the 1920s and still a good place to live. Dr. Polk notes the cultural life of Harlem, with its music and theaters alive during the Jazz Age. After the Depression and World War II, the numbers of middle income blacks shrank and the area became more depressed. By 1952 it was almost predominantly low income with crowding and many attendant health problems.

Chapter 11

Two Busy Professionals Struggle to Find a Place to Live

[00:17:35]+

In response to a question, Dr. Polk says that she and her husband, Edwin, “lived at their hospitals” and to clarify, explains that this was not a joke. Because of difficulties finding a place to live in Harlem, they each had rooms at their respective hospitals. She describes some challenges finding a sublet and notes that they also lived together at Harlem Hospital in 1954. She notes that the difficult living situation influenced her decision to do her residency at Harlem Hospital.

Chapter 12

Confident as a New Resident at Harlem Hospital

[00:24:29]+

Inspiring stories [00:27:25] +

In this chapter, Dr. Polk describes her work as a resident at Harlem Hospital (1953 – 1955). She also notes that she was very confident as a physician at this time, though she wasn't during her internship at Sydenham. She tells an anecdote from this period: two instances when she did not call her attending for assistance because she wanted to take responsibility for delivery of a breech birth and also of twins.

Chapter 13

Establishing Strong Connections and a Reputation as a Leader

[00:30:34]-

Leadership

Inspiring stories [00:35:45]+

In this chapter, Dr. Polk notes the strong friendship she built with her fellow residents, connections maintained until today. She notes that she was the only female resident, but did not notice a difference in how she was treated, though she admits she was not looking for differences at the time. Dr. Polk explains some conflicts she had with the administration and tells a few anecdotes about how she asserted herself to make necessary changes in hospital procedure. She says she was “rebellious at this point.” She ends this chapter with a striking story about how Harlem Hospital was using torn up sheets for diapers in the nursery; she intervened so Pediatrics could be supplied with proper diapers for the babies.

Chapter 14

On Staff at Harlem Hospital: Creating a Transfusion Program; Research on Neonatal Drug Addiction

[00:37:55]+

Mentoring

Sexism [00:41:17]

In this chapter Dr. Polk describes two initiatives she spearheaded when she joined the staff at Harlem Hospital. She first narrates how she developed the blood transfusion program for newborns (1958/'59), eventually ensuring that the Hospital had pre-prepared kits available to transfuse infants. Next she talks about how she became involved in researching neonatal heroin drug addiction. She describes the symptoms she was observing in newborns and how she followed twenty cases to determine the effectiveness of methadone versus phenobarbital in controlling the withdrawal symptoms.

Dr. Polk next explains that she went to her chief-of-service to talk about writing up/publishing her results, only to hear from him that this investigation "wasn't important." He then introduced her to two male physicians from the Bronx who were looking at the same question, indicating she should help them. They published results before her, using some of her cases. Dr. Polk notes how disappointed she was, particularly in her chief-of-service.

Chapter 15

Many Roles at Many Places: Pro Bono Work and Work for Low Pay

[00:45:33]+

Sexism [00:52:45]+

Racism [00:54:12]+

Situation for women

In this chapter, Dr. Polk sketches the variety of roles she pieced together in the late fifties. She explains that she worked for the City of New York Clinics once a week, seeing babies at Well Baby Clinics. She was paid \$5.00 for this service. She clarifies that despite her many roles at Harlem Hospital, she was only paid for working at the premature nursery one day a week. She took on this unpaid work because she liked it. She saw patients in her father's private practice two days a week. She describes additional work with the Children's Aid Society. She then talks about joining the staff of Lenox Hill Hospital (approx. 1956 – 1967), where she was the only black doctor on staff. She treated pediatric allergies, working on the service of Dr. Matilda Gould. She also describes the only instance of sexual harassment she ever experienced and how Lenox Hill Hospital handled the situation. She tells an anecdote about racism at Lenox Hill.

Chapter 16

Opening a Private Practice; Children and the Challenges of Finding Good Child Care

[00:56:33]

Gender/ racism

Situation for women

In this chapter, Dr. Polk explains how she came to open a private practice in 1959. She and Dr. Horne had moved to Englewood, New Jersey and built a home designed to include an office for her practice. She joined the staff of Englewood Hospital and notes that she was referred all of the black patients who had no money. Her roles continued to expand. She also took on Well Baby clinics and, in 1963, became a physician for the Englewood Schools. She also started a Head Start program and served as a consultant to Head Start.

Dr. Polk also notes that she adopted her daughter, Carol, in 1960 and her son Chris in 1963. She explains that she was able to continue her career because she eventually found good

housekeepers to rely on. She notes that she was ready to give up her career if she couldn't get good child care.

Chapter 17 Burnout and a Career Crossroads

[01:03:12]-

Gender/racism

Inspiring stories [01:10:38]+

Dr. Polk begins this chapter by noting that she realized "I was doing a whole lot." She notes that she was seeing a lot of patients in her private practice, some of whom deferred her payments because "you have a husband to support you." She saw many children on welfare. Dr. Polk explains that she eventually realized that she was seeing many patients for little pay and that there were many pediatricians in the area. She thought to herself, "I've been doing public health," so she decided to get a degree in that field (conferred 1968).

Dr. Polk then explains an additional role she took on prior to working on her MPH: in 1962 Harlem Hospital became affiliated with Columbia University and she was given faculty status and kept the teaching programs going for the housestaff at Harlem Hospital. She was paid for this position. She then recalls a key moment in 1967, when she arrived home with her children, asked them to get out of the car and then just sat there for about an hour, unable to move. She decided to get her degree in Public Health. She explains that, at the time, Mae Gould, MD at Lenox Hill Hospital, asked her to join her private practice on Park Avenue in New York. Dr. Polk's chief-of-service at Harlem Hospital also wanted her to take over the Directorship of Pediatrics. She explains why she chose Harlem over the more lucrative option. She became Director of Pediatrics after she got her degree.

Chapter 18 Director of Ambulatory Pediatrics

[01:11:35]-

Leadership [01:14:29]+

Mentoring [01:17:17]+

In this chapter Dr. Polk talks about her leadership of Ambulatory Pediatrics at Harlem Hospital. She explains that she was hired into that role to integrate the Department's well-baby and curative functions, but she accomplished much more than that mandate. She integrated all services for children. She describes the factors that had kept the functions separate and then talks about how she got people to work together. She comments on where she got her leadership skills. She also observes that the only resistance she encountered was from the nursing staff, but she eventually was able to integrate their functions to achieve her vision for continuity of pediatric care.

Chapter 19 Director of Pediatrics and Perspectives on Pediatrics at Harlem Hospital

[01:19:52]

Here Dr. Polk explains the influence of Dr. Eric Kahn, who began as Director of Pediatrics at Harlem Hospital in 1962. She explains that he had to build the program up from very little and he accomplished a great deal. In a digression, Dr. Polk talks about the photograph included below of the staff at Sydenham Hospital when she was an intern there. She discusses a paper she published with him on neonatal drug addiction. Dr. Polk then explains that, when Dr. Kahn retired in 1975, he expected a new director to come in and reorganize the program. Dr. Polk explains how she became acting director (1975 – 1977), a position that she did not feel prepared for.



Dr. Polk



Reverse side of photo

Chapter 20
A Sabbatical and International Travel
 [01:29:56]-

In this chapter Dr. Polk describes a long trip she took during her sabbatical period to follow up with the foreign pediatricians who had trained at Harlem Hospital's Pediatrics in Underdeveloped Countries Program. She lists the countries she visited, and some of the individuals and programs she visited. In Nepal, she notes, she visited a hospital founded by a colleague who had graduated from the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania.

Dr. Polk also observes that during this trip she saw diseases that physicians never saw in the United States. She also saw evidence that Harlem Hospital's Underdeveloped Countries Program was effective.

Chapter 21

Director of Ambulatory Care Services

[01:50:42]-

Gender/racism
Situation for women
Mentoring

In this chapter Dr. Polk explains how she took on the Directorship of Ambulatory Care Services at Harlem Hospital in 1978, after returning from her sabbatical period. She explains that she was invited to be interviewed for the position as an affirmative action candidate. She then describes her decision to become a serious candidate for the position. She comments on her increase in salary and benefits, citing Dr. Kahn as an effective mentor who helped her negotiate and operate as an effective administrator.

Interview Session III: 10 December 2014, 2:27

Session Three Interview identifier

[00:00:00]

Chapter 22

The Importance of Telephones to Private Practice

[00:01:14]-

In this chapter, Dr. Polk talks about the importance of communications for private practice physicians. She notes that when she began her practice, answering services were just becoming available and she signed up for one very early. She recalls always carrying loose change so she could call the service to collect messages, even calling during intermissions at the ballet (she wasn't going to miss the ballet). She also recalls getting a pager in the 70s, after she closed her private practice, passing it among the staff on call at Harlem Hospital.

Chapter 23

Memories of Harlem in the Fifties and Sixties

[00:05:16]-

Race/racism

In this chapter Dr. Polk tries to capture the feel of Harlem in the years when she and her husband first lived and worked there. She describes the "125th-Street corridor" with white-owned businesses that served an exclusively black clientele. [She also recalls earning \$50.00/month as a resident.] Adam Clayton Powell led an early protest to demand that the Blumstein's Department Store hire black saleswomen. Dr. Polk also recalls that a section of Harlem had a gypsy population. She tells an anecdote about feeling slightly threatened by the gypsy family of a very ill baby. She notes that patients were sometimes uncooperative and this was part of the feel of Harlem. She also explains that the hospital system demanded that hospitals perform a certain percentage of autopsies on patients who died under their care.

Dr. Polk next explains that the predominantly black community around the hospital had a neighborhood feel. The cultural life of Harlem started above 135th Street and this was where

writers met and where the restaurants and nightclubs were located. She recalls that Harlem Hospital would invite entertainers performing at the Apollo Theater to come and entertain the staff at the Hospital Christmas party. She also mentions the churches that were an important part of Harlem culture.

Chapter 24 **A Spiritual Person**

[00:15:49]+

Dr. Polk explains that she is a spiritual person. She explains her denominational attachments over the years. She also explains that she has recently become involved in mindfulness practice, to relax, to become more connected to herself, and also to feel connected to a higher spiritual being. She comments on the effect of her spirituality on her medical practice.

Chapter 25 **Director of Ambulatory Care Services: Setting Up a Unique Service**

[00:19:42]+

Leadership

Inspiring stories [00:23:35]

Dr. Polk first lists the variety of operations she was responsible for when she took on the Directorship of the Ambulatory Care Services at Harlem Hospital, noting that the scope of responsibility was much greater than she had realized. She then describes the process by which she and others at Harlem Hospital set up a unique service. She recalls meetings in which it was clear that plans were in the works to dramatically shrink the area served by Harlem Hospital. Dr. Polk next explains how another initiative enabled her to protect Harlem Hospital. She attended in which the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Joseph Califano, requested proposals for clinics that would provide a “home base” for delivery of medical care. She explains that Harlem Hospital submitted a proposal to open “store front clinics.” This proposal was accepted and funded by the Federal government. She recalls traveling around Harlem looking for clinic locations, then worked closely with an architect to design the clinic spaces. She describes the first clinic to open, the challenges involved, and staffing. She notes that it took only one year to open the clinics. She also explains that the results were “great” and that this initiative established the basis for the Harlem Primary Care Clinic Network, which eventually became known as Renaissance. To demonstrate the innovations in this program, Dr. Polk talks about her work with computer expert, Dan Cook, who computerized the clinic records, enabling Harlem Hospital to submit hard numbers with their reports to the Federal government. This method of reporting was copied by others.

Chapter 26

A Highly Political Initiative for Senior Citizens; Finding Staff for the Primary Care Clinics

[00:38:46]-



In this chapter Dr. Polk first talks about an unfunded mayoral mandate she received to develop a primary care center for senior citizens. Dr. Polk explains why she took on this challenge. She also recalls the day the center opened and the “gold key” she was awarded by Mayor Ed Koch. She also comments on the fact that the clinic closed relatively quickly, indicating that its opening was “for show” and a very political move by the mayor. (See photo at left, taken by Tacey A. Rosolowski on 10 December 2014, reproduced with her permission).

Next Dr. Polk talks about the challenge of creating continuity of care for patients treated both at the Harlem Hospital Clinics and the Primary Care Clinics. She describes the role of the “patient navigators” in providing smooth transitions. She notes that she “took the most pride” in the Primary Care Clinics. Dr. Polk then explains how she was able to keep staffing the clinics by offering community practitioners opportunities to earn Continuing Medical Education credits.

Chapter 27

An Interest in Mentoring and a Mentoring Project with Spellman College

[00:47:29]-

Mentoring
Race and Gender

Dr. Polk begins this chapter by describing a mentoring project she set up between Harlem Hospital and Spellman College to encourage the entry of black women into medicine. She next explains that her interest in mentoring began very early in her career. She talks about the advice she would share with younger women.

Chapter 28

Director of Ambulatory Care Services: A Political Role and How it Ends

[00:54:15]-

Leadership [00:55:54]-

This chapter begins during a conversation initiated while the recorder was paused. Dr. Polk is explaining her experience with institutional politics. She explains why her Director’s role was very political and how she protected herself and her service by careful documentation processes. Next she explains how her role at Harlem Hospital became precarious, given plans to dismantle Ambulatory Care, despite the success of the programs. This led to her decision to

eventually resign her position. She describes securing the conditions she required in order to leave the position.

Chapter 29

Political Situations: Appointing a Director and Negotiating with Psychiatry

[01:02:47]-

In this chapter Dr. Polk gives examples of the political situations she might be involved in (though she avoided them when possible). She first describes the situation of appointing Dr. John Fitzgerald Hollaway to the directorship of Outreach Services, despite the fact that Mayor Koch did not like him. She describes how the political situation evolved, resulting in Dr. Hollaway's termination. Next Dr. Polk describes her interactions with the Department of Psychiatry when that department assumed responsibility for the drug detox programs originally run by Ambulatory Care Services.

Chapter 30

Reflections on Administrative Roles and Leadership at Harlem Hospital

[01:10:39]+

Leadership
Mentoring
Racism/sexism

In this chapter, Dr. Polk shares stories that show her style of leadership at Harlem Hospital. She observes that any conflicts she encountered in her administrative roles arose from the nature of administration itself, not from any tensions created because of her race or gender. She tells an anecdote that demonstrates the territoriality of different departments and the trust that she had earned in Harlem Hospital. She then explains that she was able to get departments to work together on the need for budget cuts. She attributes her skills to her mother, who always told her to "be a lady." Dr. Polk observed that she always picked her fights and that she was not what people in Harlem called a "gutter fighter."

Chapter 31

Resigning from Ambulatory Care and Retiring from Harlem Hospital

[01:19:04]-

In this chapter Dr. Polk explains how she ended up resigning as Director of Ambulatory Care Services. She returned to the Department of Pediatrics, where she was tasked with developing a quality assurance program. She worked again with Dan Cook and developed a system that was eventually copied by the central office. Next Dr. Polk explains the situation leading to her retirement from Harlem Hospital in 1994.

[The recorder is paused]

Chapter 32 **Establishing the Susan Smith McKinney Steward Medical Society**

[01:24:26]-

Mentoring
Race
Women in Medicine

Summary: In this chapter, Dr. Polk tells the story of co-founding a society dedicated to helping young black women enter medicine, the Susan Smith McKinney Steward Medical Society. This occurred in the late 1960s, and she describes the first, very successful, project with black medical students from New York medical schools. She then talks about a fundraiser held to honor black women who had been in medical practice for fifty years. She explains how the meetings worked, the numbers of attendees, and also notes that the older members provided support for each other as well as for younger women. Dr. Polk explains that the Society fell apart as more women began entering the medical profession. She notes that all the papers from the Society are now held at Drexel University's Legacy Center Project.

Chapter 33 **Women in Medicine and Advice to Young Women and Men**

[01:36:28]

Sexism
Mentoring
Situation for women

Dr. Polk begins this chapter by noting that women bring gentleness, resilience, stamina, and a drive to succeed to medicine. She talks about the great satisfaction she has derived from her medical career and says that she would advise a woman to plan for childcare and supportive husband and family if she wants to succeed. She says that she would advise young men to have respect for women. She tells an anecdote about surprisingly sexist comment made to her by one of her husband's friends. She also observes that, from her perspective, a woman's toughest competition comes from other women, who are often quick to diminish one another. she talks about the importance of feeling secure and confident.

Chapter 34 **"Another Life" Before and After Retirement**

[01:44:52]-

Summary: Dr. Polk talks about using her maiden name in professional circumstances. She describes the interest she kept up with before retiring and found more time to enjoy after retirement: being a mother, music, travels, church activities, entertaining. She tells anecdotes about her involvement in her church's soup kitchen project, where she earned the nickname, "Salad Lady."

Chapter 35
The Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority

[01:51:41]

Leadership
Mentoring

In this chapter Dr. Polk describes her involvement with the black women's sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha. She talks about working to begin a chapter in Burgin County (chartered 1970). She notes with pride that a book written about the chapter she founded was dedicated to her.

Chapter 36
Travel and a Family-Oriented Retirement

[01:57:27]-

Dr. Polk begins this chapter by explaining the origins of her fascination with travel. She sketches some of the most important trips she has taken, including the last trip she and her husband took the eastern Mediterranean. She also notes that her life has always been very family-oriented (much like the family she grew up in) and it is still that way.

Chapter 37
Preserving the WPA Murals at Harlem Hospital

[02:08:53]+

Race

Summary: In this chapter Dr. Polk explains that when she was a member of the Cultural Affairs Committee at Harlem Hospital, she began to advocate for preserving the WPA murals. She describes some of the murals, tells a bit of their history, and notes that she took people on tours of them. Dr. Polk then explains that the murals were restored and eventually moved to a new building, the Mural Building, where there is a plaque honoring her efforts to preserve Harlem Hospital's history. Next Dr. Polk talks about the Schaumberg Library, a repository for material on black history that originally had not information on Harlem Hospital. This fact led Dr. Polk to give them many of her records. She talks about donating a photograph taken at Harlem Hospital in 1950 by Moneta Sleet, a photographer who traveled with Martin Luther King.

Chapter 38
Joining the Foundation for the History of Women in Medicine and Final Comments

[02:22:32]+

Summary: Dr. Polk begins this chapter by describing how she came to join the Foundation. She notes that she joined because of her interest in the history of black women in medicine. She ends with the comment that telling her story has been on her "bucket list" and she is glad to have the opportunity to participate in an interview.