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Interview Date: June 10, 2022



## **The Alma Dea Morani Renaissance Women in Medicine Oral History Project**

**Vivian W. Pinn, MD**

### **Interview Summary and Chapter Summaries**

#### **Interview Summary**

Twelve years after her retirement as Director of the NIH Office of Research on Women's Health (1991-2011), Dr. Vivian Pinn continues to be exceedingly active in professional organizations, university boards, and continued research, mentoring, and advocacy for women and minorities in health and science careers. Her wide-ranging leadership in medicine combines a passion for pathology, a love of teaching, a commitment to health equity, and a visionary approach to women's health. Throughout her career she was a noted advocate for students, women, and minorities in healthcare. She increased the number of minority trainees in Harvard teaching hospitals while a Fellow in the Harvard Pathology Department (1970). Her position as Dean of Student Affairs at Tufts University School of Medicine (1970-1982) allowed her to mentor many future professionals. She also served (1989) as the second-ever woman President of the National Medical Association, the collective voice of African American physicians. A bona fide trailblazer, Dr. Pinn was one of the first women to chair a Pathology Department (Howard University, 1982-1991). In 1991, she was asked to become the inaugural Director of the new NIH Office of Research on Women's Health where, over a twenty year career, she has indelibly shaped understandings of women's health. Dr. Pinn was awarded the Alma Dea Morani Renaissance Woman in Medicine Award in 2020.

This five-hour interview takes place in five virtual sessions conducted between April and May 2023. Dr. Pinn sketches her early life in the era of segregation in the small city of Lynchburg, Virginia. The only child of two schoolteachers, but surrounded by extended family (many of whom were college educated), Dr. Pinn feels her family's commitment to education meant her desire to become a doctor was supported from an early age. The injustices of segregation, she recounts, molded the medical professional she has become: "more the quiet activist, sometimes the outspoken activist, but feeling very passionate about civil rights." At nineteen, while a junior at Wellsley College, Dr. Pinn lost her mother to cancer. The pain of that loss is vivid in her



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narrative and operative in the trajectory of her career. She explains how making up college courses she missed while tending to her mother's care enabled a summer internship at Harvard, introducing her to the field of pathology which has been so central to her career and identity. She outlines her choice to attend medical school at the University of Virginia in order to be closer to her grieving father. Her stories of navigating racism and discrimination in a southern institution in a still largely segregated city are a stark contrast to the many honors she presently holds at her alma mater. She shares her delight at the University of Virginia naming their new research and education building Pinn Hall, remarking on how far that is from the young student who once worried about having her name on the graduation roster.

She recounts a series of career moves – a residency and fellowship in Pathology at Harvard, faculty at Tufts, Chair of Pathology at Howard University, inaugural Director of the NIH Office of Research on Women's Health – as connected to serendipitous events, opportune conversations, and unexpected encouragements. But her narratives suggest that the goodwill she encounters is equally nourished by the depth of her friendships, the generosity of her mentorship, and the integrity she brings to collegial, familial, and personal relationships. Originally nervous about moving into the political realm, Dr. Pinn relates her tenure at the NIH Office of Research on Women's Health as immensely stimulating and satisfying years that allowed her to creatively advance agendas to improve knowledge about women's health. She speaks candidly about the difficulty of deciding to retire from the NIH. But, she notes with surprise, her retirement has featured a plethora of professional activities, renewed affiliations, and many, many accolades. This recognition, she reflects, provides reassurance that her lifetime commitment to improving health and health equity has been of value.

## **Chapter Summaries**

### **Interview Session 1: April 11, 2023**

#### **Chapter 0-A Interview Identifier [00:00:03]; p.1**

#### **Chapter 1 The beginnings of a doctor and an activist [00:03:16]; p.3**

Dr. Pinn sketches her early life centered in the small city of Lynchburg, Virginia and the surrounding rural areas. An only child, but part of a large extended family, she recounts her family's deep commitments to education. That commitment extended from her parents (who were both teachers) to her college-educated grandparents [00:11:27 – 00:15:02], an



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exceptional achievement in an era that actively resisted college education for both women and minorities. She discusses her very early desire to become a doctor [00:05:19] and her family's unwavering support of that ambition [00:08:53]. She narrates the harsh realities of growing up black in the segregated South [00:17:33 – 00:24:27]. She also relates fond memories of a closeknit family and a rural way of life [00:15:19], nurturing teachers [00:19:20], and an active church life [00:35:17]. It is growing up in segregation, she believes, that has molded the medical professional she has become -- “more the quiet activist, sometimes the outspoken activist, but feeling very passionate about civil rights” [00:34:39].

## **Interview Session 2: April 12, 2023**

### **Chapter 0-B**

#### **Interview Identifier**

**[00:00:10]; p.19**

### **Chapter 2**

#### **College in the North**

**[00:00:50]; p. 20**

Dr. Pinn recounts her decision to go to Wellesley College, an all girls college near Boston. She cites her growing recognition of Wellesley's reputation [00:02:35], her desire for snow, and her yearning for a particularly appealing fake fur coat in a storefront window! [00:01:08] She speaks about her dawning awareness of the limitations of a high school education in the segregated south, noting in particular her struggles to excel in college French with her Southern accent [00:03:29]. But she also relates the many ways, social and academic, her college experience enhanced her life and career [00:06:16- 00:08:21].

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Life Altered: the loss of her mother**

**[00:08:24]; p. 24**

Dr. Pinn narrates the events that “really changed the rest of my life” [00:08:24]. At the end of her sophomore year, Dr. Pinn hears that a tumor had been discovered in her mother's hip [00:09:30]. She recounts the harried plane ride home to be with her mother, Francena, who was undergoing immediate surgery [00:09:40-00:11:03]. She describes becoming her mother's primary caregiver when she is moved to Sloan Kettering Hospital in New York to treat the advanced cancer the surgery uncovered [00:11:50]. This situation required her to negotiate a leave of absence from her program at Wellesley [00:12:28], something she has never regretted [00:16:26]. She explains how her “personality changed” [00:12:34] as she



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became her mother's advocate and advisor in an acute situation, one tinged with racist attitudes [00:14:11]. Treatment options quickly foreclosed. Dr. Pinn speaks of returning from New York with her mother by train [00:15:22] and the deep grief of her passing [00:15:46] at 46 years of age, when Dr. Pinn was herself only 19.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Rebuilding from tragedy**

**[00:16:28]; p. 28**

Dr. Pinn describes returning to Wellesley College, grief-stricken. She relates the memories that stand out from that time: the intrusion of racism even into her mourning [00:16:28], but more enduringly the sympathy and support of her college roommates who nurtured her then and remain friends today [00:17:31]. Seeking a summer position in Boston while she caught up on missed coursework, she recounts the opportunity that serendipitously opened up with Dr. Benjamin Barnes, a transplant surgeon at the Mass General Hospital of the Harvard Medical system [00:19:25-00:21:17]. She narrates how her work in transplantation at the Mass General expanded into pathology with Dr. Martin Flax [00:21:40], and then into a semi-permanent position that continued throughout her medical school education [00:21:17]. As she was finishing medical school and thinking about next steps, she relates the professional paths that seemed unavailable to her as a black women in medicine at that time [00:22:04-00:23:28]. Ultimately, she explains, the part-time summer position she sought out in Boston in the wake of her mother's death opened onto an unexpected residency and research fellowship in Pathology at Harvard [00:23:28-00:27:03]. This becomes a stepping stone to her first faculty position in Pathology at Tufts University [00:23:28-00:27:47]. At the close of the chapter, she circles back to describe her decision to attend medical school at the University of Virginia given its proximity to her bereaved father [00:28:29-00:30:26]. Here she was the only woman and only minority in her medical school class, in a city still largely segregated [00:31:06-00:32:59]. Her story of the deep impact of a kind gesture from two male colleagues on her first day of medical school illustrates the power of connection, the need for solidarity, and the lasting commitments of her friendships [00:33:21-00:38:22].

## **Interview Session Number 3: May 3, 2023**

### **Chapter 0-C**

#### **Interview Identifier**

**[00:00:10]; p.39**

## **Chapter 5**

### **Unique Challenges: navigating discrimination as a medical student**

**[00:00:37]; p. 40**



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Medical school, Dr. Pinn relates, held additional pressures for her, the only woman and only minority in her class at the University of Virginia Medical School. She acknowledges that medical school is academically challenging for everyone [00:02:00], but her situation produced what she calls “unique challenges” [00:02:03]. She narrates the overt and covert racism she faced: patients who could only envision her as the dietician, not the doctor [00:02:55]; landlords who openly denied her an apartment because she was black [00:06:40-00:10:51]; class graduation parties held at venues that would not admit her [00:10:52]. Such episodes were emotionally difficult, she explains, with the potential to overwhelm her focus on her studies [00:05:08]. She credits her father’s support and her close friendship with Barbara Sparks [now Sparks Favazza], the only other black woman in the UVA medical school, with helping her keep her equilibrium and forward trajectory [00:01:12]. Barbara, she explains, helped her achieve a balance between “fighting the battles when it was important to” [00:04:49] and not losing sight of their primary objective: to become doctors [00:04:04]. Tying her medical student days to the present, Dr. Pinn reviews her efforts to advance appropriate mentorship for all students in medical education, but particularly for minorities and women [00:13:18-00:17:14]. She also relates her deep satisfaction when she returned to UVA years later to give a commencement address and found herself housed as an honored guest in the very facility that would have refused her entry to her class graduation party [00:11:21].

## **Chapter 6**

### **Teacher, Pathologist, and Advocate: the passions of Dr. Pinn’s early career [00:18:16]; p. 48**

Dr. Pinn summarizes the joys of her twelve years at Tufts University as faculty in Pathology and Assistant Dean of Students, noting in particular her close and rewarding relationship with students, her love of teaching, her ongoing relationship with Tufts, and the unexpected, and deeply appreciated, accolades and honors they have bestowed on her [00:18:16-00:26:04]. She explains the excellent leadership of Dr. Martin Flax and the nurturing and inclusive environment he fostered at Mass General Hospital during her residency and at Tufts University in her first faculty position [00:26:04-00:28:39]. Still, racial inequities in medicine were pronounced; Dr. Pinn elaborates her active efforts to address those inequities. “Here’s where I get militant again,” she says, as she tells the story of confronting the Dean of Harvard Medical School about the lack of minority interns and residents at the Harvard teaching hospitals [00:28:44-00:29:38]. With the Dean’s support, she and colleagues formed the Central Recruitment Council of Boston and increased the number of minority trainees [00:29:38-00:33:35]. She also speaks of her long involvement with the National Medical Association, the collective voice of African American physicians and a force for justice and parity in medicine. Her involvement was motivated by the unjust criminal charges brought against black physician Ken Edelin in the early 1970s [00:34:14-00:37:06]. Her commitment to the NMA, she relates, has been unwavering, extending from her early involvement to her induction as the second woman president (1989) to her current role as Chair of the Past



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Presidents Council [00:37:51-00:39:50]. “I think I’ve sort of become the grandma of NMA,” she jokes, as she describes the integration of the NMA with her varied career and ongoing commitments [00:39:50].

## **Chapter 7**

### **Leaving Boston: Chair of the Pathology Department at Howard University [00:42:51]; p. 58**

After more than twenty years in Boston, Dr. Pinn narrates her decision to leave the circles she has happily been part of to take up the position of Chair of Pathology at Howard University, a historically black university. Her decision, she explains, was prompted by a desire to be closer to her ailing father and an opportune conversation with a colleague, rather than adherence to a well-mapped career path [00:44:25-00:46:29]. She speaks of the new environment she found herself in. No longer a racial minority but, she relates, as a woman chair she was still one of very few; in fact, only the third woman chair of a pathology department in the United States [00:49:52]. She recounts the enjoyment of engaging with students [00:46:37], but also the resentment she encountered from the previous chair [00:47:24], a resistance to her leadership she suspects was driven by his ego and her gender [00:48:24]. She shares her advice for leaders moving into new environments [00:49:07], and explains how invaluable she found the support of the Association of Pathology Chairs in adapting to her new role [00:51:21]. She tells the rather comical story of attending the Path Chairs annual meetings with her husband, who was obliged to partake of teas and fashion shows with the spouses of the other Chairs, illuminating just how singular her status was as a female department chair in the 1980s [00:49:52].

## **Interview Session Number 4: May 10, 2023**

### **Chapter 0-D**

#### **Interview Identifier**

**[00:00:11]; p. 63**

### **Chapter 8**

#### **Transitions: from an historically black university to the new terrain of government [00:00:37]; p. 64**

Dr. Pinn summarizes the things she enjoyed while Chair of Pathology at Howard University and the contributions she made to the department [00:01:35-00:06:34]. She offers insight into the differences of being a minority in predominantly white versus predominantly minority institutions [00:06:50-00:08:39], subtle differences she feels she navigated “intuitively” [00:07:32]. She acknowledges the challenges of being Chair and her sense that she perhaps



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needed a “sabbatical” after countless years of unrelenting work [00:09:20]. But instead of a sabbatical, she recounts, a new and highly unexpected opportunity knocked. She tells the story of serendipitous affiliations and connections that placed her in a meeting of NIH representatives called by then NIH Director, Dr. Bernadine Healy (whom she had met many years earlier) [00:10:15-00:12:21]. That meeting featured a presentation about the newly conceived NIH Office of Research on Women’s Health. “I think if I had sat there quietly,” Dr. Pinn reflects, “I would have finished my career in pathology. But I put my hand up to make some suggestions” [00:12:35]. She narrates her complete surprise when Dr. Healy reached out to offer her the position of Director of the newly formed Office [00:13:08-00:14:08], describing her initial hesitance to take a position in government given her propensity to say what she thinks [00:14:08-00:14:42]. Her hesitancy, she explains, was quickly overcome by her excitement for the mission of the Office of Research on Women’s Health [00:14:42-00:16:48]. She concludes with her astonishment that an interconnected web of good colleagues, broad experiences, and fortuitous events allowed her a much loved twenty year career as Director of the NIH Office of Research on Women’s Health [00:18:27-00:20:32].

## **Chapter 9**

### **The Office of Research on Women’s Health: navigating the politics [00:20:37]; p. 73**

As a woman inclined to speak her mind, Dr. Pinn recounts the key lessons she needed to learn to be effective in government. She notes the importance of recognizing that she no longer spoke for herself, but for the NIH [00:20:58]. She relates how crucial it was to be able to observe her skillful mentor, Dr. Bernadine Healy, navigate political fine lines [00:23:31-00:25:13], commenting on how detrimental a ‘remote work’ environment may be to observing and developing leadership skills [00:28:27-00:30:28]. She explains how she learned to express a position tactfully and carefully even when it may not accord with her personal perspective, offering the heated debates around mammography guidelines as a key example of that difficult task [00:25:20-00:27:29].

## **Chapter 10**

### **The Office of Research on Women’s Health: from ‘bikini medicine’ to the life cycle model [00:30:30]; p. 78**

A crucial first step as inaugural Director of the NIH Office of Research on Women’s Health, Dr. Pinn explains, was challenging the reigning understanding of what comprised ‘women’s health’ [00:31:12]. She relates the traditional focus on “bikini medicine” (reproductive system and breast cancer) did not capture the “continuum” of women’s health issues across their lifespan or in the context of their health environments [00:31:12-00:33:12]. She details a key initiative in





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advancing this broader standing, the large and influential Women's Health Initiative study that she co-directed throughout its early years [00:33:52-00:34:52], including its controversial findings on menopausal hormone therapy [00:34:52-00:36:50]. This and other initiatives worked, she recounts, to build an understanding of the importance of sex and gender health differences across the life cycle and the role of health disparities across different populations of women [00:37:31]. She clarifies the key political players and events that sparked the creation of the Office and its central mandate: inclusion of women in clinical trials [00:38:31]. She recounts the importance of the NIH Reauthorization Act of 1993 in equipping the NIH with the power to enact that mandate [00:49:27]. She also notes the broadening of that central mandate to include a research agenda for women's health, advancement of women's careers in health [00:38:31-00:41:00], and the central role her Office played in researching the health of minority women [00:45:15]. She discusses the importance of being an Office in partnership with the NIH Institutes in leveraging more research funds and more acceptance for women's health research [00:41:00-00:44:49]. She briefly remarks on the current political turmoil around abortion and contraception, noting how such politics curtail an awareness of women's health as a life cycle issue [00:47:56].

## **Chapter 11**

### **The Office of Research on Women's Health: challenges, accomplishments, joys [00:52:26]; p. 87**

Dr. Pinn relates the most entrenched challenge of her career with the NIH Office of Research on Women's Health: ensuring women were included in clinical trials and health research [00:52:57]. She details the resistance of clinical trialists who opposed the mandate, lamented the difficulty of implementing it, or felt such mandates "destroyed research" [00:53:44-00:55:20]. Convincing journal editors to require and publish statistical analysis of women in clinical trials was an equally daunting task, she elaborates [00:55:20-00:56:51]. Despite the hardships, she reflects on the success of her Office's inclusion efforts, which did indeed "change the culture of NIH research; in fact, the design of NIH research" [00:57:16]. She also denotes the success of several other important initiatives, relating the importance of cultivating an understanding of women's health as a life span issue and generating an appreciation for the importance of sex and gender differences in health research. [00:58:51]. She remains proud of her resolve to make women's health research relevant to, rather than divorced from, men's health [00:59:50-01:00:22], telling several illustrative stories [01:00:22-01:01:50] [01:05:53-01:08:01]. "I really felt we couldn't just talk to ourselves," she summarizes [01:06:38]. She recognizes the contribution interdisciplinary programs for career development in women's health research have made to the field, detailing the SCORE program for senior researchers [01:01:60-00:00:00] and the BIRCH program for junior career researchers [00:00:00-01:05:15]. "Those two," she notes, "are probably my greatest legacy in terms of programs" [01:05:16]. Asked if her tenure at NIH cemented an understanding of herself as a leader, Dr. Pinn transposes the question to speak





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instead about the joys of creatively advancing agendas she cared about and being part of the NIH's environment of research excellence [01:08:16-01:11:40].

## **Interview Session Number 5: May 17, 2023**

### **Chapter 0-E**

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**[00:00:10]; p. 96**

### **Chapter 12**

**The decision to retire**  
**[00:00:51]; p. 97**

Dr. Pinn narrates how quickly fifteen years as the Director of the NIH Office of Research on Women's Health flew by [00:01:14-00:02:55]. She relates that she did think of retiring at that time, but her keenness to develop a final strategic plan and her deep-seated desire to not leave "loose ends" [00:02:55] meant her commitments continued for another five years [00:02:55-00:04:17]. As she approached twenty years with the NIH, she recounts her daily wrestling with the decision to retire and her final conclusion that it was time to give space to other's ideas [00:04:17-00:04:43]. Relaying the decision to her staff (who were equally friends), leaving the environment that she had been so comfortable in and committed to, sorting the byproducts of twenty years of productive and progressive work, were all, she explains, difficult tasks [00:04:43-00:08:40].

### **Chapter 13**

**Retirement: a career continued**  
**[00:08:38]; p. 100**

Dr. Pinn begins by describing what she thought retirement would be: a clean and organized house, longer vacations, a relaxed pace, and a certain 'invisibility' [00:08:47-00:09:37]. Instead, she explains, all the many fields of health she has been part of have continued to be active and industrious components of her retirement. She recounts her ongoing work with the Association of Pathology Chairs [00:10:10-00:12:23], her careful but committed involvement with the Office of Research on Women's Health [00:12:23-00:14:03], and the new contributions she is making to advancing the careers of women in academic medicine, a long-standing interest [00:14:03-00:16:43]. She outlines the major obstacles to the advancement of women in medicine today [00:17:12-00:21:40]. She recognizes that she is often in demand for her historical knowledge of the many fields of medicine she has been part of. "Sometimes I'm invited to speak as the old lady who knows what happened," she remarks, noting the importance of retaining what was learned in order to build on it



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[00:21:40-00:24:35]. She concludes with a discussion of the very different political environment for women's health today than when she took up the reins of the NIH Office of Research on Women's Health in 1991 [00:24:38-00:27:51].

## **Chapter 14**

### **Collecting honors, cherishing friendships, and recalling family**

**[00:27:57]; p 108**

Now eleven years into her retirement, Dr. Pinn relates her astonishment at the plethora of awards and honors that have been, and continue to be, bestowed upon her; so many awards that she jokes they might have to be distributed at her funeral as mementos [00:50:31]. She shares her delight at the University of Virginia (her alma mater) naming buildings after her, a far cry from the young student who once worried about having her name on the graduation roster [00:29:40-00:31:35]. She explains how it is heartwarming, humbling, and reassuring to have her many years of toil recognized as valuable contributions [00:00:00 – 00:35:51]. Her keen desire to mentor others comes to the fore in her stories of redirecting awards she is offered to younger, less recognized colleagues in the academic health sciences [00:32:56; 00:45:32]. She also discusses the personal costs of having such an illustrious and renowned career [00:36:55-00:39:27]. Nevertheless, the depth of her friendships and the closeness of family is everpresent in her narratives. She elaborates the qualities she believes have allowed her to build such flourishing bonds: integrity and humility [00:40:51-00:44:58]. "I will not get a big head as long as my family and friends are around me," she remarks, "and I don't like to see others who do either." Looking back at her life and career, Dr. Pinn notes that she would change nothing; she could not have invented a better career for herself than the one that transpired. The only things she would change, she remarks poignantly, are those that cannot be changed: the untimely death of her mother and her inability to fully share with her parents the fruition of their love and investment in her life and her character [00:46:46-00:50:07].