

# Reckoning With Racism in Nursing

## Frankie Manning Transcript

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We're addressing racism in nursing

So I identify as black and African American. I always tell people I was born colored became a Negro, then became black, and now I'm African American. So it's all of those things wrapped in white. My great Aunt I was a midwife, and I one of the things that I saw coming up was that she was always called Miss Sarah Penny, whereas my two grandmothers were both called by their first name.

I always thought that was odd, but it was because Aunt Sarah delivered most of the babies in that town. It didn't matter whether you were black, white, Hispanic. We had more Hispanics than other nationalities at that time. And so people all of the white people called her Miss Miss Sarah Penny. In later years, I, I was able to go to hospitals for different reasons, but in my little town we didn't have a hospital.

So the closest hospital for the black people was in Taylor, Texas. So I recall my sister having an acute appendicitis and my mother and I went to stay with her. So in those days, you would stay with your kin in the hospital. And I just was marvel at how nice the nurses were to my mother. And I always remember that in later years, as I had elderly people come to the hospital, to the VA, where I work, and they came from rural communities.

And I always remembered how the nurses would bring my mother and I a wash cloth and a pillow so that we could be comfortable. That just stayed with me. So that began my journey in nursing, and I've never looked back. I've loved it. It has been a career that has lots of turbulence and things, but it's it's been good for me.

I have had a lot of racism in my career. I grew up in this black and white world. So it wasn't like it was foreign to me. I often tell people to this day I don't drink at a public water fountains because we had black and white water fountain. But in nursing, what I came to the profession with was this concept of purity and that people really believed that they came to care for people.

And so when I began to notice things that were treated different, black people were treated differently. It was it was strange, you know, because you learn all of these principles and and early on, you know, I mean, I saw lots of stuff, but when I graduated, that's when it hit me the most. I was asked to teach at the school where I graduated from because in those days you could teach in diploma programs.

And so I said, sure, you know, and about two weeks before I was to start I had a call from Sister Sylvia's who said, you know, Frankie we can't hire you because we can't have black folks teaching in the school. And that's what the Superior nun had told her, I said, that's fine. I wanted to work on the black ward anyway, so that was fine.

I went to work on the Black Ward, nights. And what I noticed immediately was, although I had worked down on that ward sometimes as a student, when I became an RN I immediately noticed the difference in the the equipment I noticed the difference in how much was available to the black patients and how they were put in rooms together, who you may have a pneumonia patient with the new surgical patient, whereas upstairs all of the patients were second set, separated by medicine, a surgery or whatever So that, you know, immediately strike me as odd I was in Delaware and I was working.

And the first thing that struck me was in this hospital they had this ward that was about the size of, oh, gosh, you could fit patients I think was the total you put on that ward and if you add it went up to , you would have to add this room this cut out a hallway. And so that's where all the black patients were.

So one of my skills was to start IV's. So they found that I could start IVs and the nurses in Delaware couldn't start them at the time This was Dover, Delaware, right below the MasonDixon line. And I thought I was going where white people really understood black people. But I found out pretty quickly that they didn't. I was called one day to do an I.V. on a patient and the patient.

When I walked in the patient's room, he said, I do not want that nword to touch me. And I looked at him. You know, I had always brought to respect patient's wishes. So I walked out of the room with the nurse. I said, that's fine with me. So she's well, I'll call Dr. Baker. So Dr. Baker came over. This man had a hemoglobin of seven, and he was bleeding.

He was just white as a sheet. And so Dr. Baker came over and he said, I can't start no I.V. this guy. He says, Come on. So I went in with them and he says to the patient, Do you want to die? And the patient said, No. He says, Well, if you don't want to die, this is the only person here who can start your I.V. And either she starts it or you die. And so he looked up at me, and they let Dr. Baker in.

He said, OK. And so I prayed to the Lord to don't let me miss that IV because he had really bad veins and he was bleeding. So anyway, I stuck. The patient got in right away and he started getting his blood. What I recall most about that was he was discharged two weeks later he found me down on the Black ward where I often worked, if I could.

And he came and told me he was very sorry about what he'd said to me. And I said, that was fine. You were very sick. And went on with caring for my patients, but that always struck me that. He looked me up and found me. One of the other things that happened to me when I was in Delaware, which is often interesting when I hear these stories about racism and other things.

But when I was working there, I carpool with several other white nurses one nursing aid and one nurse. I she was one of the nurses was from Canada. But I said one day as I got my pay stub in my carpool, "boy these people pay so little money?" And so they the nursing assistant to me said to me that, well, how much do you make?

And I said, I'm making \$ an hour. She said, That's what I make. So they were paying me the same amount as this nursing assistant. I was furious. I was so serious, I didn't know what to do. I said, I am not going to work until they pay me my salary. When I went to work that morning, I was supposed to report on the ward and I didn't, I went right to the chief nurse's office, told her what they were paying me, and that was what I made in school and I was not going to work for that.

And so I was so mad at those people, I didn't know what to do. Oh, shit. They went, Oh, well, just go to your ward. Well, I said, No, I am not going to work until I get my pay and sure enough that I don't know how they did it, but they figured out how to get me a check and paid me my back pay be clear and have a philosophy and don't go into nursing.

If it's a job, because it is. It's a commitment and it's service to others where they are not where you want them to be. And so and don't be paranoid, I would say to people, yeah, I mean, you are trying to racism but deal with it and move on don't hold on to it because it destroys you. I would ask the any person coming in to have a commitment to that career and to the patients that they serve and to the communities where they live.

And if they have those things, they will always learn and move forward. Nothing can stand in their way I feel blessed to have been a part of a career that I was often ignorant of. Some of the things that happened. I saw them. I dealt with them when I could, but I could not always deal with them. But I, I, I was fortunate enough to have supporters in places I didn't even dream of.

So I've tried not to allow things stand in my way. Although there have been times that I've had to go home, pray a little extra and shed a lot of tears. And I learned to shed tears. But I, I, my staff used to say to me, yep, I said, you bring me bad news. Do you think I could sit up like a stone?

I, you know, I cry with the best of them, but but so I'm very grateful. But racism is a very tragic demise in our society because we harm people and we harm not just the people that are targeted. We harm the dominant people. That's why I fight so hard at nursing today. You know, at years old, I don't need to be out here riding around with little students and stuff like that.

My kids often tell me that but I want to leave this place better. I think I have something to say I'm not afraid to say it. And I'm not afraid to accept criticism because in my life I learned that wasn't perfect and didn't have all of the knowledge. So I had to learn by virtue of my mistakes because people can come and tell me what I did wrong.

So so I've grown a lot I still I learn a lot all the time. I love dealing with the students. I still learn a lot. So so that's why I'm out here, clawing in this dirt today is because racism is such a travesty and it's bad for all people, not just for the people who are targeted.