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# BLACK HISTORY IN MEDICINE NEWSLETTER

*Presented by the WUSM Student National Medical Association*

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## CELEBRATING DR. HELEN E. NASH

Pioneering pediatrician,  
professor emerita  
(clinical), and former Dean  
of Minority Affairs at  
Washington University  
School of Medicine in St.  
Louis



Dr. Helen E. Nash. Courtesy of [4]: Bernard Becker Medical Library

Greetings from SNMA, and Happy Black History Month!  
For the first installment of our weekly newsletter, we will  
be focusing our attention on the life and works of  
Dr. Helen E. Nash, a black pioneer in medicine and a  
tireless advocate for her community.

Warmly,

SNMA Black History Month Co-Chairs



# CELEBRATING DR. HELEN E. NASH

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To understand the barriers Dr. Nash broke, the conditions she was born into should be explored. Dr. Nash was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on August 8th, 1921, and was the third born of six children. Her father, Homer E. Nash was a doctor who served in World War I, and her mother was a homemaker. (3) In the early 20th century, Atlanta was filled with racial tension. One of the tactics used to impose residential segregation was to move historically Black colleges and universities to designated areas of the city, thereby limiting what White residents termed “Negro encroachment.” For example, in 1910, White residents of the Jackson Hill neighborhood attempted to move Morris Brown College to another part of town only to be met with resistance by the local Black community [1]. Although the road to college was fraught with obstacles, Dr. Nash attended Spelman College in Atlanta and graduated in 1942. Graduating from college was a momentous achievement on its own as, in 1940, only 2 percent of Black women held a college degree [2]. Still, Dr. Nash’s education was far from over, and each subsequent step to becoming a physician was more challenging than the last.

Although she had ties to a career in medicine through her father, her pursuit of medical training was as improbable as it was inspiring. Even her father was hesitant to support her future career path, citing that a woman not even scratching 100 pounds did not have the stamina to attend medical school. Dr. Nash doubly felt the obstacles of pursuing an advanced education due to her race and gender. However, she did receive support from her maternal grandfather, who helped convince Dr. Nash’s mother to sell land to pay for her schooling [4]. Dr. Nash attended medical school at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, her father’s alma mater and one of two medical schools that were dedicated to the enrollment and training of Black students at the time [3,5].

Dr. Nash proved her grandfather right when she made the honor roll in her first semester at Meharry and graduated with a medical degree in 1945. Despite attending a historically Black medical school, Dr. Nash still held a unique identity at the institution, as she was one of four women in her graduating class [3].

1945 marked the beginning of Dr. Nash’s long and fruitful career in St. Louis. After graduating from medical school, Dr. Nash pursued a rotating internship and later a Pediatrics residency at Homer G. Phillips hospital, which exclusively served St. Louis’s Black population until its integration in 1955 and closure in 1979 [3,6]. Dr. Nash’s skillful approach to medicine was noticed at Homer G. Phillips Hospital, as she became chief resident by the end of her training.  
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Meharry Medical College is the second largest educator of Black American medical doctors and dentists in the United States.

Despite her talent and achievements, she was no stranger to attempts to undermine her ability. One story, in particular, embodies the discrimination that plagued not only Dr. Nash's early career but also the Black patient population that she served. She once informed a surgeon that a Black infant had appendicitis and needed an operation. The surgeon replied that a female physician was incapable of making that judgment, and proper treatment was delayed. The patient tragically passed away the next morning [3]. Although experiences like this contribute to the burnout of underrepresented medical practitioners to this day, Dr. Nash was ultimately undeterred in her mission to advocate for patients. She used her influence at Homer G. Phillips hospital to tackle some of the adverse health outcomes that were pervasive in the hospital's Black patient population. For example, the premature infant mortality rate for the hospital was around 80 percent during the time of Dr. Nash's residency training. In response, she became an outspoken advocate of instituting common sense infection control to decrease the incidence of preventable infant mortality [3]. At Homer G. Phillips Hospital, Dr. Nash was an example of thoughtful and empathic care to a patient population that was largely forgotten, if not egregiously mistreated by the nation's overarching medical community. Nevertheless, Dr. Nash's impact extended beyond Homer G. Phillips Hospital.

After completing residency, Dr. Nash opened a medical practice in 1949 using her own savings. The initial site for the practice was 1048A Vandeventer Avenue, in the middle of St. Louis's Black business district [3]. One of the many progressive practices she began was starting a program nicknamed the "Sex Room," which educated sexually active but largely uninformed teenagers and their families about birth control choices, parenting skills, and basic anatomy [3]. To put her efforts into a larger context, in 2009, Black children were reported more likely to receive an abstinence-only sexual education [7]. Although maddening, these trends highlight just how forward-leaning Dr. Nash's social program regarding sexual education was.

Dr. Nash simultaneously held other positions as she ran her medical practice. She was hired by St. Louis Children's hospital in 1949, the same year she opened her practice. With her appointment, she became the first Black American ever hired to staff at the Children's Hospital. The same year marked another milestone, as she was the first Black woman ever appointed to faculty at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis [3]. (continue)



Homer G. Phillips Hospital Landmark in the Ville. Courtesy of [6]: Black Past

The milestones alone go far from telling the whole story. Dr. Nash spent decades serving the St. Louis community at a time when Black patients often had to wait for “Black days” to be seen by a clinician. “Black days” were special hours in which Black patients were allowed to come into select medical offices. These restricted hours were put into place to limit the visibility of Black patients in clinics’ waiting rooms [8]. At the same time, Dr. Nash’s service was not limited to only treating her patients’ medical concerns. She exemplified the idea that excellent patient care revolves around adopting a holistic approach to medicine. In an interview in 1999, Dr. Nash recalled how she had seen a Black patient who was deaf. The patient’s mother explained that her daughter, Sheila, was not allowed to enroll in the Central Institute for the Deaf (CID) because she was Black. Outraged, Dr. Nash, along with her colleague Dr. Park White, approached the school board and ultimately was able to enroll Sheila at the CID [8]. Following Dr. Nash's retirement as professor emeritus (clinical) of Pediatrics in 1993, she served as the Dean of Minority Affairs from 1994 to 1996.

There are many examples of how Dr. Helen Nash went above and beyond for her patients and community. At the time of her passing on October 4th, 2012, she had become an example of resilience and empathy to so many. Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis continues to honor her legacy through the Dr. Helen E. Nash Academic Achievement Award. An exemplary physician, friend, and mentor to three generations of St. Louis children, SNMA is honored to commemorate Dr. Helen E. Nash in our first Black History Month newsletter of the year.



Dr. Nash with infant. Courtesy of [4]: Bernard Becker Medical Library

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## Upcoming SNMA BHM Events

SNMA Virtual Movie Night: The Color of Medicine  
February 17, 2022 - More details will be sent out

SNMA BHM Virtual Trivia Night  
More details about this event will be sent soon

## Community Highlights of the Week

The Griot Museum of Black History  
2505 St Louis Ave, St. Louis, MO 63106,  
(314) 241-7057

The Legacy of Dr. Venable  
February 24, 2022  
Celebrate the resilience of Dr. Howard P. Venable, an ophthalmologist and university professor who worked for equity in health, education, and legal justice. In celebration of Black History Month. More info on time and registration here.

## Book of the Week

The Racial Divide in American Medicine: Black Physicians and the Struggle for Justice in Health Care by Richard D. deShazo, MD, MACP (Editor)