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OBITUARIES

Esther E. McCready, first African American admitted to University of Maryland School of Nursing, dies

By **FREDERICK N. RASMUSSEN**
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FEEDBACK



Esther McCready, who broke barriers at the University of Maryland, poses with her photo at the nursing school museum. (Baltimore Sun photo by Karl Merton Ferron)

Esther E. McCready made history in 1950 when she became the first African American to be admitted to the University of Maryland School of Nursing after a legal battle led by Thurgood Marshall that resulted in a case helping to lay the groundwork for the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, died Wednesday from a blood-borne infection at Northwest Hospital in Randallstown.

The former longtime New York City and North Ellamont Street resident was 89.



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“Esther was a pioneer and a class act in addition to being a trailblazer at the nursing school,” said Larry Gibson, a University of Maryland law professor and longtime friend.

“Even though once she was admitted to Maryland, and those were difficult years for her, she always kept her composure and positive thinking. One professor turned his back on her and refused to look at her,” Mr. Gibson said.

FEEDBACK

“They would not let her live with the other nurses and converted an office above the dean’s office in the nursing school for her. And the next year, two other black nurses entered the school, and all three women lived in the same room,” he said. “And through it all, she remained positive.”

[Shanti David, a pediatrician and animal lover, dies »](#)

Jane M. Kirschling, a registered nurse with a Ph.D., is the dean of the nursing school at Maryland.



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“Esther accomplished amazing things on behalf of those of color, and she opened doors that had been firmly shut,” Dr. Kirschling said. “She opened doors that needed to be open, and today 49 percent of our 2,000 nursing students are of color. That in itself is quite a legacy.”

Yolanda Ogbolu, an associate professor and chair of the University of Maryland School of Nursing’s Department of Partnerships, Professional Education, and Practice, has been a close friend for the last decade.

“We’ve lost a legacy who was a civil rights activist for nursing,” Dr. Ogbolu said. “She pressed through so many obstructions to become the first black nurse at Maryland, and I think part of her ability to be persistent was because she was a Christian. She was a quiet giant, quiet, but forceful icon.”

FEEDBACK

Dr. Ogbolu added, “I am Black, I am from Baltimore, and I grew up two blocks from the nursing school and hold three degrees from the University of Maryland. If I couldn’t have walked through that door, I couldn’t have done that. Following in her footsteps I do not take lightly, and I’m honored.”

[June Park, who owned a Charles Village cleaning and tailoring business, dies »](#)

Esther Elizabeth McCready, daughter of John McCready, an arabber, and his wife, Elizabeth McCready, a Roman Catholic church housekeeper, was born and raised on Dallas Street.

She was 8 years old when she decided that she wanted to pursue a nursing career. She graduated from Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, where she was an honors student, and during her high school years worked as a nurse's aide at the old Sinai Hospital on Broadway in East Baltimore.

She and a friend who also wanted to be a nurse “applied to all the nursing schools in the phone book (they divided the alphabet and Miss McCready took the second half), and she informed the schools she was Black,” The Baltimore Sun reported in a 2009 article.

She told her friend, “Let’s tell them we are Negroes because we were not trying to pull the wool over anyone’s eyes,” she explained in an American Nursing Association Journal article in 2016. “I knew what they were going to say, but I wanted them to make them say it.”

The only nursing school in Baltimore at the time that accepted Black students was Provident Hospital. To maintain the separate-but-equal legal standard, the University of Maryland School of Nursing would pay tuition to send three Black nursing students each year to study at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee. Miss McCready was determined that she was not going out of state or attending Provident’s program. She wanted to study at the nursing school she walked by for years.

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She applied to Maryland and waited for months for a reply; when she inquired about the status of her application, she was told her credentials were under review.

After she visited her physician, Dr. Rayner Brown, for a mandatory physical for her application, he asked her if she had contacted the NAACP for assistance. She eventually came into contact with Charles Hamilton Houston, dean of the Howard University Law School, civil rights attorney, and chief counsel to the NAACP, and Donald Murray, the NAACP attorney in Baltimore.

When the University of Maryland Nursing School announced its admission for those who would enter in 1949, Miss McCready's name was not among them, at which point Mr. Houston informed her, "We will take them to court."

"She didn't even tell her parents that she was going to sue us," Dr. Kirschling said.

Harry C. "Curley" Byrd, president of the University of Maryland at the time, was opposed to desegregation. "He did everything he could to resist," Mr. Gibson said.

FEEDBACK After the District Court ruled against her, the NAACP appealed, and the case was argued by Thurgood Marshall, grandson of a slave, who would become the first Black Supreme Court justice in 1967.

Miss McCready recalled Justice Marshall's summation in a 2005 article in *The Sun*. "He was brilliant. He argued that the University of Maryland was a state school supported by taxes, and the Negro people pay taxes too."

The favorable Maryland Court of Appeals decision was handed down in April 1950, ordering the University of Maryland to accept her as a student in the fall of 1950.

[Sara King, co-founder of Liberty Jewish Center preschool, dies of the coronavirus »](#)

After their victory, Miss McCready and Mr. Murray went to visit Mr. Houston, who was dying in a Washington hospital.

“It was his last civil rights case, and Mr. Houston called Esther the ‘Last of the Mohicans,’ ” Mr. Gibson said. “He died several days later.”

Despite prevailing in the court, Miss McCready continued to suffer indignities throughout her nursing school days, such as being forced to enter through a colored entrance and eating in a segregated area of the cafeteria, Mr. Gibson said.

“But the cafeteria staff that was all Black looked up to her and made sure her tray was loaded with food,” he said.

On her first day in nursing school, a white nurse gave her some advice: “If you don’t pray, you won’t get out of here, because nobody here is for you.”

“It was Psalm 91,” Dr. Ogbolu said. “Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the Shadow of the Almighty. ... If you say the Lord is my refuge, and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you.””

After graduating in 1953, she worked as a Baltimore public health nurse, then moved to New York City, where she became the head post-operative room nurse at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center.

FEEDBACK

[Ruth Burkins, a former Harford County teacher and administrator, dies »](#)

She studied at the Manhattan School of Music, from which she earned undergraduate and graduate degrees, and performed in the Metropolitan Opera’s production of “Porgy and Bess.” She received a degree in elementary education from Hunter College and taught in New York public schools.

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Miss McCready returned to Baltimore, serving on Maryland’s nursing school Board of Visitors from 1994 to 2004, and was a docent in its Living History Museum. Her 1953 Florence Nightingale cap — or “Flossie” — that she received at graduation is on display at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum.

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In 2014, she was inducted as an inaugural member of the University of Maryland Nursing School’s Visionary Pioneers, and the next year she was the recipient of a Doctor of Public Service honorary degree from the University of Maryland, Baltimore.

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“She always remained very positive about Maryland when she had every reason not to be,” Dr. Ogbolu said.

“You will always be humble as long as you know where ALL of this comes from — your knowledge, your abilities, your gifts — it comes from God,” she said at commencement in 2015. “I’m so grateful.”

Funeral services will be held at 10 a.m. Thursday at the March Life Tribute Center, 5616 Old Court Road, Randallstown.

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She is survived by many nieces and nephews and great-nieces and great-nephews.
