Guest Editorial: Gloria R. Smith, 1934-2013

Editor’s Note: Gloria Richardson Smith, PhD, RN, FAAN, internationally valued as a leader in nursing and public health, passed away on January 14, 2013 at the age of 78. Her career had included work as a public health nurse, Public Health Director for the State of Michigan, Dean of Nursing at University of Oklahoma and Wayne State University, and in 1991 took her to the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, where she served for two decades, rising to the role of Vice-president for health programs until her retirement in 2001.

Smith was a cofounder of the National Black Nurses Association, which presented her with its Trailblazer Award in 2000. The Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools (now CGFNS, International) recognized her with its International Distinguished Leadership Award in 2003. She was an American Academy of Nursing (AAN) Living Legend and a member of the Institute of Medicine.

Gloria Smith had a talent for speaking truth to power—or, at least, for saying what needed to be said. In November 2002, she delivered the inaugural Smith-Kellogg lecture at the annual meeting of the AAN. The lecture had been named to honor her lifelong contributions to nursing and public health. Her lecture focused on health disparities—a major focus of her career. Her talk questioned whether nursing, in advancing the profession and its status, was “losing its capacity for caring” and reducing its capacity for helping to eliminate disparities. Her talk was direct and even confrontational, but also proposed a path forward, ending with a focus on policy change to affect the social determinants of disparities.

A few years later, I had heard from Dr. Smith about publishing a commentary based on her lecture. I knew that we had not been her first choice of journals, but that was fine with me—I was thrilled by the opportunity to publish it. And so, her article “Health Disparities: What Can Nursing Do?” was featured in our November 2007 issue, Vol. 8 No. 4. It is one of the most compelling articles we have published, and it bears reading and rereading.

We asked PPNP Editorial Board member Barbara L. Nichols, DHL, MS, RN, FAAN, to offer her remembrance of Gloria Smith and her contributions.

I knew Gloria Smith as a friend and confidante for more than four decades. She was a phenomenal mentor to me. Her detractors often criticized her candor. While others saw it as a liability, I saw it as a unique characteristic, a tremendous asset for her and a blessing to me. You could always count on Gloria to tell it as she saw it—her favorite saying being “truth is always in order.” She frequently challenged others to “fess up” to their biases.

Her Blackness animated her but not in a narrow isolating way but with pride of her ancestry. In my mind, Gloria Smith was an archetype. She was an exceptional model of how a professional and friend can make a significant difference in the lives of others in real and positive ways. Her courage to overcome labels, to bring people together, and argue for causes is legendary. She was indeed a global ambassador for professional nursing and a champion for human rights and social justice.

I will forever miss her.

Barbara L. Nichols, DHL, MS, RN, FAAN