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Pitt in the Making: When diversity was the 'bye' word

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Editor's note: Pitt in the Making is a new occasional series looking at the history of the University.

By MARTY LEVINE

"The doors of racial prejudice which have barricaded the University of Pittsburgh medical school for more than 20 years have been blasted!" declared the Pittsburgh Courier on May 4, 1935.

The Courier, with its headquarters in the Hill District, covered the Black community locally and throughout the world. The weekly newspaper was not beyond a bit of hyperbole. But in this era, when Blacks were barred from everything from restaurants to juries, and Congress could not bring itself to pass an anti-lynching law, the paper's outrage was rarely unjustified.

"Breaking like a bombshell," the paper said, was the news that Pitt School of Medicine administrators could neither deny nor justify the fact that only two Black students had attended the school, one graduating in 1915 and the other not graduating at all.

In the same state investigation that found Pitt kicking out liberals and not granting tenure (see the July 2 University Times), University officials also faced questions from the Hill's state legislator, Homer Brown, about a "color bar" at the med school and a state panel heard testimony from local Black doctors and the NAACP.

The medical school dean, R.R. Huggins, told the panel that "to his knowledge, no qualified colored student had applied for admission to the medical school during his regime." At the same time, Chancellor John Bowman "denied the responsibility of the color bar and indicated that it is not the policy of the University," and professors from Pitt's law and history departments told legislators that "many" Black students at Pitt "had ranked with the most brilliant in the University."

"Huggins finally admitted that he had not examined or personally contacted any of the Negroes who had made applications," the Courier reported.

"Queried further as to whether any discrimination existed in the school, he replied 'No,' but added: 'There is a difficulty because the hospitals would not give colored men the medical practice they need in their third and fourth years'" — when their course of studies moved from books to bodies.

"Huggins' contention on this score was also blasted a few moments (later) when he admitted that he had never received any word from any hospital official to the effect that Negroes could receive no clinical work there. He added, however, that his belief was based upon his own personal opinion."

One of the local Black doctors, W. Roderick Brown — Homer's brother — was then a staff member at the Tuberculosis League Hospital locally and had participated in cardiology classes at the Allegheny General Hospital. "During that time they handled a great number of patients, only three of the entire number were colored, but none of the whites ever registered dissatisfaction or complained about the presence of a Negro physician," he testified.

Huggins admitted his faculty might be able to persuade local hospitals to allow Black physicians to gain hands-on training there, if it came to that. But it would be easier if local Black people had their own hospital, he said. It could even be located on Pitt's campus, he volunteered.

The NAACP said that at least six Black students had attended Pitt's School of Medicine between 1900 and 1915, "but during the past 30 years there have been no advanced students in the school. Among the local doctors who testified, Paul Knott … stated that (he) had applied for admission to the medical school and had been refused."

The sole graduate, Richard Fowler (according to a report quoted in the School of Medicine's history, "A Century of Excellence"), had likely been able to complete the medical school program because "he looked like a white man."

Pitt was not alone in admitting classes full of white, mostly Anglo-Saxon Protestant men, of course. Most Black medical students attended Black medical schools, at such places as Howard University and Meharry Medical College.

"By 1930," the history says, "approximately 100 blacks were graduated from medical schools annually, but only 68 internships were open to them. Before 1950 the rate at which blacks were granted medical degrees each year rarely kept pace with the death rate among older black physicians. And while blacks were required to meet the same standards as whites, their opportunities for professional advancement were circumscribed."

By June 22, 1935, the Courier did not hesitate in labeling the med school's policies "Jim Crow" in a headline, saying the legislators, in their concluding report, had made a "wholesale condemnation of the Pitt officials."

W. Roderick Brown, by the time he died in 1965, had been director of the Allegheny County Health Department's tuberculosis control program and on the staffs of two hospitals. He and Paul Knott were named to the teaching staff of Pitt's medical school in 1949.

Congress, by the way, finally passed the anti-lynching law — in 2020.

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Volume 55-50
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