

Shirla Philogene on 'colour prejudice'

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Shirla Philogene moved to Essex from St Vincent and the Grenadines in 1959, aged 18, to train as a nurse. Here she describes her experience of prejudice on a ward. The interview was recorded in 2008 for the 'Empire of Care' exhibition at Hollytrees Museum in Colchester.

“Now, people talk about racism and all that sort of thing. I think the term that was used was ‘colour prejudice’ at the time. But, again, it wasn’t foremost in my mind.

And I was on this ward, with two others who were in the same PTS [Preliminary Training School] as I was. They had been there about two or three weeks before me, so I was considered the junior. But we were all going to sit our exam - preliminary exam - together in about a month. And they were being shown things and taught. I was relegated to doing the beds, the bedpans, the backs, and the baths. No medicines or anything like that. And I kept saying to Sister– and she would shout at me. The first time she shouted at me, I went to her– I think this must have really got to her– I said “Sister where I come from, it’s rude to shout. You know, if you want to say something to me, call me and tell me”. And she kept sending me to Matron for trivia. And I thought, I’ve had enough of this.

So I didn’t say anything. I had the morning off, nine til one. So I went down to the post office and sent a telegram, “Money urgently needed for passage home – I’ve had

enough”. And they didn’t miss me until somebody had died on the ward, and you have to perform the last offices. And of course – where’s Nurse Allen? That’s all the sort of thing she could do. And I wasn’t there. So they rang up Home Sister, who came and found me. She must have thought I was going bunk, because I had stripped the bed, I’d packed everything, and I was just sitting there waiting for my passage to go home [laughs]. Sister said, “What’s this?”. I said, “I’m going home”. She said, “There’s somebody to perform last offices on - come”. And she escorted me like I was an escaped convict! She took me back to the ward. And I did what I had to do, and you know, the Sister was very frosty.

But in the night, that telegram came. There was a stir, you know. Night Sister came, and she said “What’s all this?”. And I said, you know, “I’m not learning anything, I’m supposed to be taking my exam, I’ll fail, so there’s no point in my staying here”. She said, “I’ll send some of my friends to talk you round”. She got some Jamaican, some nurses, senior nurses, to come and talk me out of it. They came and they did what they had to do, but I was still determined to go. And the next morning I had to go to Matron – she was friendly with my Deaconess back home – and told me that it would reflect badly on the hospital, and that it would demoralise the nurses, and you know, think it over. And from that day onwards, I had no more problems with the sisters and the staff. They gave me- they allowed me to do what I ought to do, and they taught me. But had I not taken that stand... ”