

Celebrating Women

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PART OF HISTORY: Clockwise from main, the statue due to be unveiled at Whittington Hospital; many young Caribbean nurses had to contend with racism from staff and patients (Picture: NHS ENGLAND); Jak Beula, founder of Nubian Jak Community Trust; nurses from the Caribbean and Africa played a key role in developing the NHS



HONOURING BLACK NURSES

Statue recognising contribution to the NHS will be unveiled on Windrush Day

By Kwaku



ON WINDRUSH Day, June 22, the Nubian Jak Community Trust (NJCT), an organisation that highlights the historic contributions of black and minority ethnic (BAME) people in Britain, will unveil a statue dedicated to all the Commonwealth and Windrush nurses who have worked in the NHS.

It is a fact that there were black women, be they British-born, from the Caribbean or Africa, working in Britain both before the creation of the NHS on July 5, 1948 and after its launch.

In recognition of the service and sacrifices made by these women – including my mother-in-law, who came from the Gold Coast (present day Ghana) in 1947 to train as a nurse, to the vast numbers that came as part of the Windrush Generation – the 7ft high by 7ft wide statue will be unveiled at Whittington Hospital in Archway, north London.

The statue is in the form of a Madonna and child, representing a black nurse suckling the baby NHS.

The hospital was chosen because of the numerous African and Caribbean nurses who have worked there.

The statue is the brainchild of Jak Beula, the founder and chief executive of NJCT.

He says: “The reason I decided to make the nurses sculpture 7ft high and 7ft wide was to reference the seven decades of service black nurses have been making to the NHS.

COURAGE

“We owe so much to this pioneering generation of women. Thousands of Caribbean and African women answered the call over 70 years ago to come to the UK and support the fledgling health service. “Their story is one of a struggle to overcome racism and also courage, commitment and achievement in the face of very difficult circumstances.

“The country as a whole, as well as the NHS, is better for their contribution and that is why a statue honouring them is so important, because it provides a permanent reminder of their important legacy.”

It’s estimated that around 40,000 nurses and midwives from around the Commonwealth answered the call from “the Mother Country” to help the fledgling NHS, which was

facing problems recruiting enough staff.

Many of the young women who arrived had an idealised vision of what living and working in Britain would be like.

But working in the NHS during those early years was not easy for black nurses, who regularly faced hostility.

Many recall patients who refused to be treated by a black person, or who would even be physically aggressive.

There were hospital managers who would refuse them senior posts, because white staff didn’t want to be supervised by a black person.

In time, however, the incredible patience and perseverance of these women meant that eventually they became a visible presence in major city hospitals.

Over the 72-year history of the NHS, the dedication and service of BAME nurses has been exemplary. Indeed, it has been argued that without their contribution, the NHS would have floundered.

The new statue will be, as far as I’m aware, only the third dedicated to a black female in a public space in London.

The first is the Bronze Woman, unveiled in Stockwell, south London in 2008 and inspired by Guyanese-born educator and

“The country as a whole and the NHS is better for their contribution”

writer Cécile Nobrega’s eponymous poem.

The other is Mary Seacole’s imposing statue unveiled in 2016 by St Thomas’s Hospital.

To coincide with the launch of the statue, NJCT will publish a book entitled *Nursing A Nation*, which will highlight some of the personal stories of Commonwealth and Windrush NHS nurses.

Women such as Princess Eldoris Campbell, who successfully challenged racial discrimination on her way to becoming Bristol’s first black ward sister; Guyanese-born Daphne Steele, who is believed to have become Britain’s first black hospital matron in 1964; plus Jamaican-born Dame Karlene Davis and Ghanaian-born Cecilia Anim, who went on to head the Royal College of Midwifery and Royal College of Nursing respectively.

Others who have scaled the highest rungs of the NHS exec-

utive ladder include the current chief executive and general secretary of the Royal College of Nursing, Dame Professor Donna Kinnair, and Trinidadian-born Professor Jacqui Dunkley-Bent, NHS England chief midwifery officer and midwife at recent royal births.

MEMORIAL

The statue is the latest in a long line of initiatives that celebrate the role played by people of African and Caribbean people that Beula has launched.

He was behind the African and Caribbean War Memorial, dubbed the Brixton Cenotaph, because of its location in the area’s Windrush Square.

The memorial honours the contributions of African and Caribbean servicemen and women during the First and Second World Wars.

Before launching NJCT, Beula had a wide-ranging career, having been a social worker, an actor, and a model – he was the male face of Interflora’s early ’90s advertising campaign.

He has also been a singer. His 1980s band Stigma was distributed by indie label Beggars Banquet, whilst his 1990s band This Medusa was signed by Don Taylor, the former manager of Jazzy B and Bob Marley.

In the late 1990s, Beula also

authored the *Nubian Jak’s Book of World Facts* as well as designing the Nubian Jak board game, both of which have had several editions released in Britain and across the world.

This varied background has reflected itself in the range of projects that NJCT has been involved with.

Bob Marley was the subject of the first NJCT plaque, which was unveiled in central London in 2006.

I also worked with him on the plaque featuring the Wailers’ mainstays Marley, Bunny Wailer and Peter Tosh, which was unveiled last year in Ladbroke Grove.

By the end of this year, NJCT will have unveiled more than 50 plaques across London and other parts of Britain honouring people of African Caribbean heritage in a range of fields.

It is this contribution to highlighting black history that has earned Beula an honorary doctorate, and a nomination in the Community Achievement category alongside community activist Zita Holbourne and rapper and public speaker Akala in this year’s BLAC (Bright Lights Awards Ceremony), at the ILEC Conference Centre in Earl’s Court.

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