**The Life of Dr. Grace Marilyn James**

In the 1960’s, when hospitals were still segregated based on race, Dr. Grace Marilyn James of Institute, West Virginia was making waves in the field of medicine. Despite growing up in poverty in West Virginia, Dr. James persevered through racial, social, and gender inequities and became a well-established physician, spending most of her career in Louisville, Kentucky. She became affiliated with eight hospitals and spent a large chunk of her time on a variety of committees and boards, attempting to improve the healthcare system for minority groups in Louisville. Despite her accomplishments and tenacity, her work has still not been truly recognized. It is here that you will be walked through the life of Dr. Grace James to see her struggles and triumphs and recognize the changes she made to medicine in Louisville.

Grace Marilynn James was born to Stella Grace Shaw James and Edward L. James on August 12th, 1923, in Charleston, West Virginia. The James family moved to Institute, WV shortly after her birth. While much of her early life has not been well documented, it is known that like most other families in Institute at the time, the James’ lived in poverty. Edward James owned a local produce store, James Produce Company, while Stella worked as the postmistress at the local post office. The difficulties in Dr. Grace James’ life began early when her best friend died at the age of 10. After graduating high school, James remained dedicated to her education. She earned a Bachelor of Arts from West Virginia State College where she later worked prior to starting medical school. In 1950 she graduated from Meharry Medical College, one of the few historically black medical colleges available at the time. She moved to New York City to complete her residency and it was there that her medical career as well as her dedication to advocacy work began to flourish. She had previously decided to pursue a career in medicine because she wanted to learn of “human suffering” especially regarding Black patients. A later visit to Lincoln Hospital in New York City compelled her to dedicate her career helping “the ones who need to be taught, educated, and given a chance to learn the sound principles of health”. After completing her pediatric residency at Harlem Hospital, she became a clinical fellow at both Babies Hospital and the Vanderbilt Clinic. Her time working in the different hospitals encouraged her to study pediatric psychiatry at the Creedmoor State Hospital.

In 1953, shortly after marrying her husband Charles Carlisle O’Bannon, James moved to Louisville, Kentucky where she spent the rest of her career. When she arrived in Louisville, hospitals were still segregated by law and the majority of Black patients sought care at the Red Cross Hospital which was run specifically for the Black residents of Louisville. The hospital had only 66 beds and 22 physicians despite the over 83,000 Black residents in the metro area at the time. The few Black physicians in Louisville were primarily restricted to working at the Red Cross Hospital but could have limited authority at other hospitals in the area.

To start her Louisville career, she began working in a non-paying, part-time position at the University of Louisville Medical School and was the first Black woman on the faculty. Eventually she became an Assistant Professor of Pediatrics and remained at the university for nearly 30 years. The honorable plaque that was awarded to professors after 25 of teaching was given to James 8 years after her 25th year with the school. In addition to her time spent at the university, James worked a number of other jobs and spent much of her time doing advocacy work. She became affiliated with eight different hospitals across the city and led the “Mental Retardation” divisions for many of them. She also worked as a pediatrician for the Jefferson County and Louisville Health Departments. As a part of her advocacy work, she proposed a Maternal and Child Health Unit at the Red Cross Hospital as well as an on-call system for physicians, a program that was already in use at other hospitals in the area. Dr. James also started the “Teen Awareness Project” in which she mentored young pregnant teens. The project included guest lecture series, monthly parent forums, field trips, and social/recreational activities. Beyond medicine, Dr. James headed the Council of Urban Education. The council was a citizens group that was aimed at improving the educational outcomes of Black children and can be credited for helping to establish the West Louisville Health Education Program.

In a time when medicine was seen as only a physical health issue, Dr. James was persistent in discussing the role of what we now call social determinants of health. She advocated for a comprehensive, preventative and universal health care system and was one of the first clinicians to begin the conversation surrounding infant mortality rates and maternal mortality for Black women and mothers, particularly those from underserved communities. She spent a great deal of her time advocating for Black women and lecturing on what she called the “Triple Jeopardy” -- a concept in which racism, sexism, and capitalism work together to inhibit and repress Black women.

Despite the years of amazing advocacy work, Dr. James is most remembered for the clinic she opened in the west end of Louisville. The clinic has been remembered by many names including the West Louisville Medical Center and the West End Medical Center but nonetheless it was established to provide care to the underserved communities of the Russel, Portland, Shawnee, and California neighborhoods. The walk-in clinic opened in 1967 and unfortunately closed in 1978. Dr. James faced unnecessary difficulties in simply opening the clinic due to prolonged construction and delayed permits. The obstacles she faced in opening the clinic as well as the selflessness she used when running it both led to financial difficulties and its eventual closure. However short-lived it may have been, the clinic was life-changing for many residents of the West End. Dr. James opened the clinic with the intent to serve *all* patients, regardless of insurance status or ability to pay. She wanted to curb disease and the high infant mortality rates present in those neighborhoods. In addition to simply providing healthcare to the children of those areas, she also kept stocked a pantry full of necessities for babies. Mothers who were unable to afford the materials would be given them free of charge. Such materials included diapers, socks, blankets, onesies, etc. Dr. James was known for giving random demonstrations in her clinic lobby. She would demonstrate how to properly change a diaper or bathe a baby. Just like her advocacy work, her clinic was aimed at addressing the physical *and* social determinants of health.

In a time in which Black women were undervalued and Black physicians were a rarity, Dr. James faced many unnecessary battles. She faced racial discrimination from white men and women as well as sexist discrimination from white and Black men. She received backlash from individuals from all races and backgrounds for her dedication to serving those living in poverty. In 1972 Dr. James was placed on probation from the Humana hospital due to what they saw as an overutilization of the Medicaid program. The decision to put her on probation was made by comparing Dr. James’ clinic to other pediatric clinics in Louisville. Such a comparison failed to take into account the high number of Medicaid patients that Dr. James served at her practice. The probation was quickly revoked.

Dr. Grace James died on January 14th, 1989, due to heart failure. She was only 65 years old. She left behind one son, David James and a legacy that has continued to inspire young Black women in Louisville. Years after her death she was inducted into the Kentucky Women Remembered Exhibit. In 2020, 31 years after her death, the Grace James Academy of Excellence was founded as a public school for young Black girls. The school uses what they call the “Dr. Grace James Curriculum” in which students are taught about disparities, structural racism, and social determinants of health. The school is also dedicated to connecting its students to STEM fields where Black women are currently underrepresented.

The legacy left behind by Dr. Grace James has been underappreciated for many years. Only recently has it begun to gain attention and her years of advocacy work and dedication to those in need has been brought to light. Her short life did not stop her from making a lasting impact on everyone she interacted with. Her legacy lives on through the Grace James Academy of Excellence and her story continues to be an inspiration to others.

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