



Dr. Emil Naclerio stands beside a sedated Martin Luther King in Harlem Hospital

The Day Harlem Hospital Center Saved the Civil Rights Movement

BY JOHN M. PALMER, PH.D.
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Every day, thousands of people walk through the doors of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Pavilion at Harlem Hospital Center. Patients, staff, and visitors all walk past the elegant bronze plaque mounted in the lobby of the building. The building was named in honor of Dr. King several years after Harlem Hospital Center saved his life, and as a result, saved the Civil Rights Movement. The history of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Civil Rights Movement, and Harlem Hospital Center are bound together in a story of service, strength and survival.

The story bears repeating. On September 20, 1958, while signing copies of his book *Strive Toward Freedom* in Blumstein's Department Store on West 125th Street between Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and Frederick Douglass Boulevards, Dr. King was stabbed in the chest with letter opener by Izola Curry, a black woman. He was rushed to Harlem Hospital Center. Where doctors indicated that he narrowly escaped death because the weapon had lodged in his chest near his aorta in such a way that he might have died if he so much as sneezed!

In a letter written from the inpatient unit on the sixth floor of Harlem Hospital Center, Dr. King asked that the crazed woman not be jailed and instead be treated at a mental hospital. She was later diagnosed as criminally deranged.

Dr. Aubrey de Lambert Maynard headed up the medical team who was credited with saving Dr. King's life. Dr. Maynard was a surgeon who specialized on treating the heart, chest, and abdo-

Photos courtesy of Harlem Hospital



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with his wife, leaving Harlem Hospital after his near fatal trauma

men. At the time of Dr. King's stabbing, Dr. Maynard was the Chief of Surgery at Harlem Hospital Center, but he had a long history with the hospital, having joined the staff as a surgeon in 1928. Dr. Maynard's professional reputation was well known. His innovative work in establishing a division of thoracic surgery and improvement of surgical procedures at the hospital did much to enhance the Hospital's reputation in the medical community. In an interview with the *New York Times* in 1996, Dr. Maynard remembered how significant he felt it was for Harlem Hospital that Dr. King had been treated there: "It was a momentous time for Harlem Hospital Center because it was a man of Dr. King's position who was known all over the world for what

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he was doing. For him to be brought to Harlem Hospital for a dangerous thing like that, where his life was at stake, it was a challenge. Could Harlem Hospital show that it was up to this task? You see, it was a city hospital, and it was looked down upon. It was up to me to show the world that I could be done there."

The actual surgery on Dr. King was performed by Dr. John W.V. Cordice and Dr. Emil Naclerio, both attending physicians in the Department of Surgery.

There are many things today that our youth take for granted. Being able to sit down in any restaurant and be served. Being able to purchase property and live in any community, being able to attend any high school, college or university. Before the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. brought national attention to these injustices, the civil rights we so take for granted were not available to African Americans.

If Izola Curry's plan had worked, there very well might not have been a civil rights movement. Were it not for Harlem Hospital Center, there may not have been a civil rights movement. There might not have been a March on Washington. On September 20, 1958, Harlem Hospital Center saved the civil rights movement. ■

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GIVING BACK

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Consider donating an insurance policy, personal property, establishing a charitable remainder trust, or setting up a fund at a black philanthropic organization. The National Black United Fund and other respected black philanthropic organizations can help you create a strategic giving plan that reflects your values and will benefit you, your family and the community all at the same time.

As the holiday season comes to an end and a new year is ushered in, we in the black community should be reminded of who we are as a people and what our collective responsibilities are as black Americans. There are thousands of black people who are attempting to meet the needs of our communities through their organizations and programs. They need money to plan, grow and build for the prosperity of our future as a people and they should be able to turn to us, their family for help.

This year, may the liberating expectations of Umoja, Kujichagulia, Ujima, Ujamaa, Nia, Kuumba and Imani – consume us all. ■

The National Black United Fund is a public philanthropic institution founded in 1972. Its mission is to create, support, and sustain social, economic, cultural and educational institutions through the enhancement of Black philanthropy at the local level. For more information about how you can give back to your community, call 973-643-5122 or visit www.nbuf.org.

