

Focus on Compassion

Enhancing Access to Palliative Care Worldwide

This month we celebrate the 100th birthday of hospice and social work pioneer Dr. Bernice Catherine Harper who helped found Global Partners in Care (formerly known as the Foundation for Hospices in Sub-Saharan Africa). Her accomplishments are more than we can capture in this article, but as we celebrate Black History Month, we are honored to highlight her notable contributions and legacy.

To Care for the Dying, First Love and Care for the Living

The world is filled with remarkable people – leaders and heroes whose values guide them to place the needs of others above their own, who strive for the betterment of others, and who use their strength to fight for those in need. Social media and news outlets share stories of these heroes and heroines, but there are many more of these humble leaders who do not receive mainstream recognition for their contributions.

This is the story of one such woman – one whose life has been dedicated to those in need – and her many contributions. This is a woman who has chosen a life of service over a life of comfort; a woman who never backs down when faced with adversity. This is a woman who fulfilled her childhood dream of becoming a missionary to Africa. This is a strong, compassionate, resilient woman who has dedicated her life's work to ensuring all people have access to a comfortable and dignified death. Dr. Bernice Catherine Harper, MSW, MScPH, LLD, who turns 100 this month, recently reflected on the history of [Global Partners in Care](#) (formerly the Foundation for Hospices in Sub-Saharan Africa) along with her own history as a pioneer in the field of social work and hospice care.

UPBRINGING AND EDUCATION

Bernice Ola Catherine Wright (Harper) was born in Covington, VA. She grew up in a family of 12 in a segregated society, and there was no room for complaints or self-pity; Harper learned at an early age to control what she calls her "TNT" (tears and temper). "I had a terrible temper. How else would I survive in a family of 12?!" From a young age, Harper learned to carry herself with dignity and stood up for what she believed in. She came to the conclusion early in life that the integrity of an individual is irrelevant to the color of their skin. Harper learned to see beyond outward appearances and to love each person for whom they truly are — a conviction she cultivated in all aspects of her life. While her brothers and sisters hoped to one day live and work in New York or Washington DC, Harper set her heart on becoming a missionary to Africa. She was just eight years old at the time, and she had no idea where Africa was located. Her neighbors called her "the little missionary" because she would frequently walk children to Sunday school, take care of the sick and help others with their daily needs. Little did she know that her passion for helping others would propel her to a life of service that would indeed one day take root in Africa.

Caring for others was always central for Harper, yet she also recognized her own self-worth. She quit her first job, cleaning rooms and mopping kitchens, at the age of 10. "I worked hard and she paid me 10 cents. I told my mother I'm not going to work for her anymore – I worked all day and she only gave me a dime and I'm worth more than that."

Faith was also an important part of Harper's upbringing, and her family was very involved in their church. Harper also learned a lot from watching her mother and father manage such a big family. She credits "God, family and church" as the bedrock of her upbringing, and the foundation of her leadership skills.



Dr. Harper addresses the Southern Africa AIDS Care Training Council in Zimbabwe, 1996.



Dr. Harper (second from right) with nurses from Island Hospice in Harare, Zimbabwe, 1996.

When Harper made the decision to attend college, she was the only one in her family who thought it was possible. Her siblings had exhausted all of the family college funds, so Harper took initiative to find another way. She received a scholarship to cover tuition at Virginia State College, but not room and board. She needed a workstudy position to cover this cost. On a visit to campus, she marched into the office of the president and asked to work in his home to help cover this expense. He admired her tenacity, but that position was filled. He promised to contact her if the other person didn't work out – which was exactly what happened. Harper ended up cooking and cleaning for the president and his wife during all four years of college. She attended classes during the day, cooked and cleaned in the evening and still managed to find time to study.

Harper earned her undergraduate degree from Virginia State College in 1945 with majors in education and psychology. She was a proud member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. Virginia State College was the only public institution for Black people in a segregated Virginia and they did not offer many graduate degrees, so Harper went to California to pursue a master's degree at the University of Southern California's (USC) Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work. She still faced racism in California, but became one of the first out-of-state students to receive a Master of Social Work (MSW) from USC in 1948. Ten years later, she further broke barriers by earning a Master of Science in public health (MScPH) from Harvard University. She was among the first Black women to do so. Finally, Harper earned an honorary Doctorate of Law from Faith Grant College in Birmingham, AL in 1994.

[Click here to read more of Dr. Harper's life story](#)

Supporting Palliative Care Training in Africa

In 2011, the African Palliative Care Education Scholarship fund for Nurses and Social Workers was established with a partnership between the [African Palliative Care Association](#) and Global Partners in Care. The fund was originally established by generous donations from the [National Association of Social Workers](#) in honor of Dr. Bernice Catherine Harper and from an anonymous donor in honor of the palliative care service of Katherine Defilippi, a nurse from South Africa.

Nurses and social workers play an important role in providing holistic palliative care services to those suffering from life-limiting conditions. A crucial component of making these services available and accessible to those in need. APCA and GPIC support the training of nurses and social workers to enhance their palliative care skills and knowledge.



If you would like to make a donation to the scholarship fund in honor of Dr. Harper's 100th birthday, please do so below.

[Donate to African Palliative Care Scholarship Fund](#)

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