

**Perspectives of Change:
The story of civil rights, diversity, inclusion and
access to education at HMS and HSDM**

Interview with Valerie Montgomery Rice | March 20, 2017

JOAN ILACQUA: [00:00] All right. So we are now recording. So today is March 20th, 2017. And I am on the phone with Dr. Valerie Montgomery Rice. And we're doing an interview for the Center for the History of Medicine, Harvard Medical School. So, Dr. Montgomery Rice, do I have your permission to record?

VALERIE MONTGOMERY RICE: Yes, you do have my permission to record.

JI: Wonderful! So my first question is -- should be easy -- and it's just background -- could you please tell me about yourself? Where'd you grow up?

VMR: I grew up in Macon, Georgia.

JI: OK. And what did your parents do?

VMR: So I was... My parents originally, up until the age of 6 - my father worked at Keebler Cookie Company and my mother was a stay-at-home mom. And at age 6, my parents divorced. And so I was then raised by my mother, along with my three sisters. My mother worked various job, for the first 5 years after the divorce and then she started working at

Georgia Kraft paper company. So she worked for 25 years on the swing shift, 7:00 to 3:00, 3:00 to 11:00, 11:00 to 7:00.

JI: Oh, wow!

VMR: And that was probably the trajectory that added some stability. Because we were able to purchase a home and that type of thing. And that happened probably when I was -- mm, I'm thinking that I was probably about in the ninth grade, when that occurred.

JI: Wonderful! And so did medicine play a role in your early life?

VMR: Not at all. You know, my decision to go into medicine was a very -- you know, I guess it was probably impulsive. I was... In Macon, there were three high schools. And I went to Southwest High School, which, in 1979, when I graduated, was the largest high school in the nation. My graduating class was around 1,049 or so. And I was in an honors program, had done well in math and science. And essentially, my career counseling was my science teacher, Mrs. [Nuebel?], said, "You're good in math and science, so why don't you go to Georgia Tech? They're looking for black kids to be engineers." And (laughs) with that, I decided to go to Georgia Tech and major in chemical engineering. And so I didn't make a decision to actually

even consider medicine till after I had been co-oping with Procter & Gamble for four or five times and they offered me a position that would allow me to have a permanent job there on graduation. And truthfully, that frightened me. Because I really did not enjoy chemical engineering. But I enjoyed math and science. But I missed the people component. And so, you know, after looking (laughs) in the encyclopedia and looking up math and science and people, medicine came up. And so I decided I would go to medical school.

JI: Oh, wonderful. So what brought you up to Harvard Medical School?

VMR: Well, the decision to go to medicine, as I said, was impulsive. And so when I came back, after my co-op experience, with this job opportunity offer in hand and recognizing that I didn't want to be an engineer, I went over to Spelman College -- because at that time, Georgia Tech did not have a formal premed program -- and told them my idea that I thought I would go to medical school. And I remember clearly the counseling person saying to me, "You don't seem to know a lot about being a doctor." And I said, "Well, I didn't know a lot about being an engineer and that's turning out OK." (laughter) And so she said,

"All right. This is a determined person." And she actually said to me, "Are you familiar that Harvard Medical School has a" pre-summer progra-- I mean -- excuse me -- "a premed program that occurs in the summer and that you could...? If you could get in that program, that may help you to understand what medicine is about. And even if you don't get in medical school next year, maybe you'll have the foundation to get in medical school the next year." She said, "A problem is, though, that the application is two weeks away." And remember, this was back in 1982 -- '82? -- yeah -- '82. And we didn't have fax. We didn't -- I mean -- I'll bet they had fax -- didn't have fax, didn't have internet, for sure. And so [05:00] we were still typing things. And so she gave me the paper application. I went back over to Georgia Tech and was able to get that application done. The people in the Office of Minority Affairs helped me. And I was able to get my recommendations in. And I got into that summer program. And so that summer program... I took the MCAT before I got there. Because they told me also, "You know, you got to take this MCAT test." (laughs) And so I took the MCAT, and did OK. I did pretty well on the MCAT -- and went to the summer program, and sort of began to understand what

medicine entailed. I, you know, did pretty well in the program. I don't remember if there was a grading system. But I was very, very inquisitive and very much interested in understanding what it took to get into medicine and made some great connections with the office of minority affairs. I can't remember what it used to be called at Harvard Medical School. But Dr. Alvin Poussaint and Ms. Brenda Lee were the two primary persons there who gave me some advice. And then I applied to medical school that summer, so that, when I got back to school that fall, I went ahead on and applied to medical school, and happened to get into Harvard Med.

JJ: Excellent! And so, you know, could you tell me about...?

So you finished up at Georgia Tech.

VMR: Yeah.

JJ: And...

VMR: Oh, and I finished up at Georgia Tech with a chemistry degree. Because I was on a five-year program for co-oping. And so, at that time, you actually didn't have to have a degree to go to medical school. You just had to have the prerequisite. So what I had to do in that last two quarters or three quarter that I had, I had to take the two biology courses, which, I had never taken biology. And

what I recognized, when I starting taking the biology courses, I recognized that I had enough credits to at least get a chemistry degree. And so, instead of walking away from Georgia Tech with nothing, I decided to take the senior-level chemistry course, which ended up being very, very difficult, because I had not necessarily... You know, I had taken biochemistry, I had taken organic chemistry, and all that. But I was not a chemistry major. And taking that senior chemistry course led me to understand that I had some gaps. I was able to make it through. I think that was probably one of the lowest grades I'd ever made, barely getting out of there with a C. But by that time, I had already gotten into medical school, so I didn't really care. (laughter) Don't say that. Don't say that. But I wasn't that really concerned about it. But I was able to get a C, so that I could then graduate with at least a chemistry degree from Georgia Tech.

JJ: Great! So as a quick aside, I've heard from several people who hadn't finished their undergraduate degree before coming to Harvard Medical School.

VMR: Mm-hmm. Yeah!

JJ: But to come in with a chemistry degree, I think, gives you a bit of a different background there. So you had already

mentioned you had met Al Poussaint. You know, when you came to Harvard Medical School, what was your experience here? Had you ever lived in New England before? Was it really different?

VMR: Well, remember, I had been to that summer program, the summer before. Right? And so... Now, I'm from Macon, Georgia. So I lived in Atlanta. But I lived in Atlanta before the Atlanta was a different city, was bigger than Macon but there were still not... I mean, we didn't have a train system. We didn't have a significant MARTA system. They had the train. We had buses. We did not have a significant homeless population, that I had been exposed to. And when I co-oped at Procter & Gamble for the times that I co-oped, it was in a very controlled environment. I worked at [Sherwoods?] plant, which was actually out in the suburbs. So I had never really been in a major city to live. So the biggest thing that I noticed, when I was there that summer, when I got to Harvard Med, was how dense the population were and how the transit system was your primary mode of transportation and the homeless population. That really challenged me. When I was there, for like the first two weeks - - I'll never forget -- one of my classmates said, "If you continue to give every homeless person a dollar, that you see, you will soon not have any money to live on." That was a big

(laughs) challenge for me, being in the city. JI: I can imagine that. It's a different world up here --

VMR: Yeah.

JI: -- having live in the South and, [10:00] you know, up here in the North. It's very different. So when you got here, did you become involved with any groups or clubs on campus or...? You know, different people I've talked to, over the course of this project, have described different, essentially, groups focused around diversity at the school. Did you do anything like that, while you were in medical school?

VMR: Oh, sure. I was very involved here, I think. I was definitely involved with the... I can't reme-- What was our committee called? What was the...? So the... What was the name of the organization, for the minority student-? I can't remember what it was called then. Mm. But, yes, I was invo-- How could I not remember that? Because I'm about to go back to my 30th reunion. I'm old now. So I was definitely involved with the minority student. I was definitely involved with the office of minority affairs. I was involved with the Admissions Committee. So at one point, I was on the Admissions Committee. And then, in my third year, we were developing a new curriculum. So I was involved with the new curriculum. So I was highly engage.

I probably was the cochair of... Now it's going to ruin me. Let me find my yearbook. I have my yearbook here.

Hold on.

JI: "Co-chairperson and founder of -- Black Gra-- Coalition."

VMR: What was it call?

JI: "Co-chairperson and founder of the Black Graduate Coalition."

VMR: OK. So I was a cofounder. What was it? Black Graduate...? (laughs)

JI: Black Graduate Coalition.

VMR: The Black Graduate Coalition. OK. She found it. So.

But, yeah, so I was involved with several different activity, when I was -- yeah -- so, yeah, when I was there. So that was -- I guess that was, yes, 1984 there. I was the co-chairperson and founder of the Black Graduate Coalition. So. And then the Aesculapian Club. I was... So I'm still a member of the Aesculapian Club at Harvard Med School. So, yeah. So I still give money to them. And then I was selected *Who's Who Among American Women*, also, when I was there. I think so. Yeah. Yeah.

JI: Oh, wow! So I'm curious about, actually... I've heard a bit about the Black Graduate Coalition. But could you tell me a bit more about that organization?

VMR: I mean, you know, I'm trying to remember if that was the exact name of the group that we had, that really was... Oh, I know what this was. This was... So one of the things that we did was we were trying to pull together the black students from all of the other graduate schools.

That's what that committee was. So it wasn't just for Harvard Med. So we founded this group. And we used to have an annual event with the medical student, dental student, law student, MBA stu-- kids from the theology school, etc. So that was that group. But then I was involved with the... What is the student organization called, the undergradu-- I mean, not undergradu-- but the one that was for the Medical School? So... You know, it's Student National Medical Association. But we called our group something else. So I was involved with SNMA. But we called it something else then, at Harvard. And I can't remember what the name of it was. But I was very involved with that group.

JJ: Mm-hmm. So in addition to these groups and, actually, in addition to Al Poussaint and the people in the office for multicultural affairs, did you have any mentors on campus?

VMR: Ooh, yes. I have some great mentors. So my three primary mentors... Well, clearly, Dr. Poussaint was -- continues

to be a mentor. The other three persons besides Dr. Poussaint... Ms. Brenda Lee, who was the office of multicultural affairs. And then the other three people really became very clear mentors for me, when I decided that I wanted to do OB/GYN. We-- I really wanted to do reproductive endocrinology. But I had to do obstetrics and gynecology, to get there. And so I... Dan [Toshinsky?], Isaac Schiff, and Ann Kiessling were my three primary mentors, and such that I spent pretty much the last nine months of my fourth year in the lab of Dr. Ann Kiessling and then also doing some other side research [15:00] with Dr. Dan Toshinsky. And that was preparing me, actually, to be a reproductive endocrinologist and fertility specialist.

JJ: Wonderful.

VMR: And so they provided significant advice and support. I was able to get a Commonwealth Fellowship, in order to support my research time in the lab, such that I actually didn't go away and do any fourth-year electives. I actually did basic science research for most of my fourth year.

JJ: Wonderful. And what drew you to -- I know you had mentioned reproductive endocrinology -- what drew you to researching that, in particular, or specializing in it?

VMR: Because I only -- because I wanted to do reproductive endocrinology. And what really was the key ingredient that probably enticed me... So I did that rotation toward the end of all my rotation. Because I thought, for sure, that I was going to be a neurosurgeon, when I went to medical school. And so I was not interested in birthing anybody's babies. And so I didn't think I was going to do researches in gynecology. And the first baby that I helped to deliver, the family actually named the baby Montgomery. So that was already pulling at my heart string. And then the second thing that happened, when I did my... I chose to do two weeks... In the OB/GYN, you could do two weeks of specialty work. You could either do GYN oncology or you could do perinatology or you could do reproductive endocrinology. And I chose to do reproductive endocrinology. And I met Isaac Schiff. And I thought that he had the best bedside manner of any person that I'd ever met, he and John Thompson, who was my professor here at Emory in OB/GYN, who wrote Te Linde's gynecology textbook. Those two person had the best bedside manner. And I wanted to have his love of engagement with patients, and then his passion for sharing knowledge. And I really recognized that reproductive endocrinology was a very much

research-focused -- it was on a sharp trajectory of expansion. I got to see the first transvaginal egg retrieval, using ultrasound. And I was very excited about that. So it was really my interest in being a reproductive endocrinologist versus, more so, doing OB/GYN.

JI: Well, that, I think, makes sense, considering your background in being interested in research but also in people.

VMR: Yeah.

JI: I think Schiff's name is one that comes up a lot, around these parts, as just being really a force.

VMR: Yeah. He's a major force, major force. Yeah.

JI: So I'm wondering if there are any moments that stand out to you as, you know, catalysts or turning points in your medical education. You described being interested in reproductive endocrinology. But do you have any other stories to tell me about being at medical school?

VMR: You know, I will tell you, as I think about the things that probably made the biggest difference for my experience at Harvard Medical School -- was that I felt very supported. So I felt that there was clearly the opportunity to do anything that I wanted to do. Now, I also, though, I have to tell you, were challenged by, you know, some things that

were happening there. And one of the things that sticks out to me -- and I can tell you that this was not something intentional, but this was something that was probably happening in medicine, all around -- and I remember this specifically, that when we were in -- it's probably our first or second year -- and they would talk about sexually transmitted diseases. All the pictures that they would show were primarily pictures of women of color -- vaginal areas, et cetera -- that had syphilis or herpes or some disease. And I didn't appreciate how subliminally that can bias you, okay? And it wasn't until very much later in [20:00] my career how I appreciated the fact that -- how unconscious bias really impacts everything that we do, and how important it is to make sure that we are conscious of these things. Because that really did make me feel very uncomfortable. I was very uncomfortable. But I didn't feel like I had a voice to share that. Does that make sense?

JJ: It does. And that's --

VMR: But I can tell you, if I were to have challenged someone there, they wouldn't have thought that they were doing anything intentional. That was not their intent. But it would have taken people -- people would have had to go the

extra mile, right, in order to ensure that they showed the diversity of persons -- that syphilis and HPV, et cetera, there may have been an increased incidence of -- in those underrepresented minorities, but how important it is to show that it's not only those persons who contract the disease -- or to address the issue of, why is there increased incidence? And I think some of that clearly influenced the trajectory of my career. Because what I then did was, when I started working in women's health, I started working as an advocate for women of color -- looking at how they were disproportionately not represented in clinical trials, looking at diseases that disproportionally impacted women of color based on their reproductive function or endocrinological function. So -- and then now, how I have had a career -- you look at much of my publication, it has looked at health disparities. And even now, how it influences my conversations about how we achieve health equity. And so I think that some of those things that happened early on were clearly a reflection of that.

JJ: And an influence on the rest of your career, which -- actually, that's one of my next questions was, I wanted to know -- you have had a very illustrious career, but

briefly, about your career after Harvard Med. I saw that you went back to Georgia, and I wondered about what you decided to do next.

VMR: It was a long task to go back to Georgia. I mean, I wasn't -- you know what, one of the things that was clear to me is that my fourth year of medical school and the research experience that I had there really did lay the foundation for me, that I knew that I was going to have a career in academic medicine. There was no doubt about that. I really did appreciate academic medicine and understood that that was going to be my pathway to providing clinical care, to continuing to do research, to educating and training the next generation. And so that foundation was laid in that fourth year of medical school. Because when I came to do my residency, I actually chose Emory because they were going to let me continue some of my research. So I continued my research -- I continued doing major research (inaudible) throughout my four years of residency and won the resident research award every year except for one year -- which I should have won, they gave me second place because they were probably tired of me winning -- anyway, I sound like a sore loser, but that's true. (laughs) And then I won the state of Georgia resident research award.

And so all of that was laying the foundation for me to do my fellowship in reproductive endocrinology. And then doing my fellowship. And then I knew that I was going to go into academic medicine. And so after going through academic medicine and going from an instructor level, I received tenure as an associate professor at the University of Kansas, became division head, and then became a chair at Meharry, and then became the dean and senior vice president and started the women's center there also -- the Center for Women's Health Research. After I was there for [25:00] four years or five years or -- I guess I was there almost eight years -- then had the opportunity to come back to Georgia as a dean and executive vice president. And to come back to Morehouse School of Medicine was really coming full circle for me, because when I was a third-year resident at Emory and at Grady Hospital, Morehouse School of Medicine -- which is only 41 years old -- that would have been 1989, 1990 or so -- they had just started their independent third-year clerkship in OB/GYN. So even though I was at Emory, I was able to have that first group of students on schedule with me. And so for me now to come back as the dean and executive vice president really was

coming full circle, because I saw the school in its infancy.

JJ: That's wonderful. So I have one final question. Are there any other stories or thoughts that you'd like to share with me about Harvard Medical School -- about your experience here?

VMR: So again, I think I had a very great experience at Harvard Medical School, so much so that, you know, my daughter's a first-year student there -- so she's in the first-year class now at HMS. And what I believe that Harvard Medical School allowed me to do was to blossom. It affirmed for me what was possible through hard work. Georgia Tech affirmed to me that you had to work hard, because Georgia Tech is still probably the hardest thing that I've ever done. However, what Harvard affirmed for me was what was possible if you worked hard -- that there would be many doors open for you, and that the Harvard Medical School brand, along with your hard work, can allow you to achieve anything. I have great memories. I'm looking forward to going back there for my thirtieth anniversary this year and seeing my classmates and getting more engaged with the institution. I've stayed in contact with people. And I'm proud of the institution that it continues to be. I went to her white

coat ceremony this year, and I was sort of laughing when I was there along with about -- three of my other classmates have students in the class also, and we were laughing about how comforting they are. Now, we thought it was comforting, but they are really, really concerned about making sure the students don't have any unnecessary stress and making sure that they're comfortable and that there are open-door policies, et cetera. And so we were laughing, because, now, we didn't feel that welcome. I mean, we felt supported, but, you know, people weren't talking about the stress of medical school -- people were much more competitive. There was much more of an air of competition -- which I'm still sure is there, but they definitely are trying to decrease the stress level of our students.

JJ: Well, (inaudible) on that story, which is another really nice -- not ending, but bringing it back around again -- being back here last year and coming back here this spring. I just want to say thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today and for being part of this project.

VMR: I am excited to be a part of it. And thank you all for thinking about me.

JJ: Oh, yeah. I mean, I would say, any time. Thank you for taking the time to be part of this and for sharing your

story, and your career is going to be, I think, an important part of this narrative.

VMR: (inaudible)

JI: Great. So I'm going to stop recording.

(END OF AUDIO FILE)