



## SPS First Black Nurse

*This article heavily draws upon the book by Lois Price Spratlen. [African American Registered Nurses in Seattle](#). Peanut Butter Publishing, Seattle, 2001 pages 227-238. Used by permission.*

**Shirley Williams Ticeson Gilford BSN RN** and grew up in Lemoyen, Louisiana surrounded by a large extended family who urged her to get educated and seek opportunities. Shirley attended a segregated public school. At age seven, Shirley gave a speech to her Baptist congregation, inspiring the pastor's wife (a school principal in another town 35 miles away) to advocate for a better education for her. Shirley spent the school year living with the principal's family and returned home in the summer to visit her aunt, uncle and mother. In 1944, Shirley's aunt's husband responded to government recruiters to work in the Bremerton, WA shipyards. Shirley completed her elementary school with the principal's family and moved to Bremerton at the start of Junior High in 1947. She stated, "it was surprising to see white people in houses that close to ours. At first, I thought there was no segregation, until I learned that the roads and certain streets were used to separate us from whites". As an adult she learned that government housing and all areas of life were segregated in the Northwest at the time. Shirley was one of two Black students in the seventh grade. Most of the students were either kind to her or ignored her. "It was always possible to feel the way some teachers felt about us. I was never allowed to forget that I

was not one of them." Shirley excelled at school and sang in the glee club. She received no advice or information about college from school counselors, but a visit from a Seattle University recruiter helped her on her way. Shirley graduated in 1953, one of six Black students (of a class of 400) and she gave a commencement speech. A friend offered Shirley a place to live in Seattle during college. Shirley enrolled at the University of Washington School of Nursing and was assigned to the Harborview Hospital Division (all Black nursing students were assigned to Harborview). Shirley interacted with Black nurses who encouraged and befriended her. She was the second recipient of a scholarship from the Mary Mahoney Professional Nurses Organization (MMPNO), a group of African American nurses in Seattle. After graduation from the UW in 1958, she worked as the first Black public health nurse with Central East office of Public Health-Seattle/King County. She was assigned to work with predominantly Black families in the central area. Shirley joined Washington State Nurse Association and served as Chair of the first state Minority Affairs Committee among the American Nurses Association state chapters. As a public health nurse, Shirley worked in schools. She applied to become a SPS school nurse and was interviewed by the nursing supervisor, Olive Blandau and the medical director, Dr. Vivian Harlan. Hired in 1962 as the first Black school nurse, she was assigned to TT Minor and Madrona Elementary Schools, working with Central Area families she already knew. Grassroots groups urged the district to hire more Black teachers and administrators in the mid-sixties. Shirley recruited other Black nurses to join SPS including Verna Hill, Muriel Softli, Vivian Lee, Pat

Watts and Frances Terry. Shirley was a leader in a ground-breaking initiative with Principal Dr. Robert Gary (now serving at Madison MS) to implement race sensitivity training between white and Black students and educators. When Dr. M. L. King, Jr was assassinated in 1968, Garfield students demanded that the flag be flown at half-mast. Shirley advocated for the student's demands and often helped to ease racial tensions between students and administrators. Shirley served as a school nurse, nurse mentor and role model at Garfield HS, Hamilton MS, South Shore MS and other schools throughout her 32 years in SPS. Shirley led the effort in the late 60s-early 70s for school nurses to be accepted into the Seattle Education Association as Certificated members. She was a leader for educating students about AIDS, breaking through stigma and fear. She served as president of Seattle School Nurse Association and MMPNO. She was honored by the School Nurse Organization of Washington as "School Nurse of the Year". In 2001 she was inducted into the WSNA Hall of Fame along with other former school nurses, Muriel Softli (pic center) and Vivian Lee (pic right). After her retirement in 1993, Shirley operated a cruise travel business with her husband, Lloyd, until his death in 2004. In 2019, UW School of Nursing recognized Shirley along with Muriel Softli and Vivian Lee as one of the 100 most influential nurses in the state.

