

Intro:

When John Hawkson was a high school student in Ghana, Africa, in the 1960's, he dedicated himself to creating a successful career in healthcare. Just two years after graduating, John made a bold and confident move, travelling over 9,000 kilometers alone, to embark on his dream. He had been accepted into a regional nursing school at a newly expanded Canadian hospital, Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH) in Barrie, Ontario!

John Hawkson enrolled as a student in the Royal Victoria Regional School of Nursing and would be a part of the graduating class of 1971. Not only would John be among the first male nurses to graduate from the school, he would also be one of the first black nurses at RVH.

Meaghan Ellis, Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB), recently chatted with John about his experience at RVH. Here is some of their conversation.

Q & A with John Hawkson

Q

How long had you been in Canada before you started school at RVH?

A

I came straight to the Royal Victoria Regional School of Nursing in Barrie, Ontario, from Ghana, Africa. Ms. Brown, who oversaw the school then, was waiting for me when I arrived and brought me directly to the school. She had arranged for everything, and I was thankful for a local family who opened their home to me for a year while I waited for a room in Residence. My hosts were an older couple who became like family to me, we would go out on the boat on the weekends. I could walk to RVH from their home, it would take me around 5 minutes.

Q

Why did you choose to come to RVH from Africa?

A

When I graduated from high school, I worked for the Ministry of Health in Ghana for two years. While I was there, I met a lot of doctors who had trained overseas. I was curious about where they had studied, so I inquired. They shared contacts from the UK, Canada, and United States. So, after I sent out a lot of applications, I was excited to get accepted into RVH's nursing school.

Q

What did you think of RVH when you arrived?

A

I didn't know anybody. When I walked into my first day of class, all I saw were white faces looking back. It was overwhelming for me as I had just arrived from Africa, and this was my first time in Canada.

But my classmates made me feel at home. We still keep in touch!

Q

Did you work at RVH after graduation?

A

I worked as a nurse at RVH for one year after graduation. I really enjoyed working at RVH. Even when I was a student, I worked there. I had a job in the kitchen washing dishes and I also had a job in the Emergency Department processing admissions. I felt very at home there. After a year of working at RVH, I was accepted at Lakehead University to study Biology. While there I would work in the evenings looking after sick students to support myself.

Q

What were other notable experiences in your career?

A

There was a summer where I worked in Hearst which is in Northern Ontario as an RN, and I worked with the Indigenous Communities there. The community was so friendly towards me, and I felt very accepted; there were very few Black people in these areas at that time. I got to know so many people and they made my life easy while I was there. I also worked a year in Thunder Bay.

Q

What would you say the highlight of your career was?

A

I was so interested in looking after sick people and found it rewarding. After graduating from RVH and Lakehead University, I joined the Canadian Armed Forces and got to travel all over. I was stationed in Germany, British Columbia, North Bay, Ottawa, and Kingston. I remember when I joined, there were not many male nurses. There were only 11 male nurses in the Canadian Armed Forces at that time, and I was the only Black person. I spent 20 years working in the military.

After I retired from the military in 1994. I began working as an Assistant Professor at Algonquin College, teaching nursing students and supporting their clinical experience in Ottawa hospitals. After that, I spent 11 years in the U.S. working first as a clinical manager and then a Director of Nursing. I then moved back to Ottawa and became a Director of Nursing for various nursing homes - and eventually for a nursing home in Barrie as well. So, I began my career in Barrie and I finished in Barrie! I retired for the final time in 2010.

Q

Your nursing graduation class of 1971 photo hangs on the wall at RVH. Do you keep in touch with any of your classmates?

A

We have been having reunions for some time, including our 50th anniversary. I have been able to attend a few. Oh, it's nice! I keep in touch with many fellow classmates.

Q

Any words of advice for new nurses entering the workforce?

A

Simply stated, nursing is a very rewarding career.

