

How did the Ambulance Program come about?

Historically, there was a county hospital in the Black community here. It had been given to the community by the wife of RJ Reynolds, Kate Benning Reynolds. She put it in her will that the county had to let it be a Black community hospital. It took about 26 years for them to break that will. They finally moved the county hospital out of the community and all the way to the other side of town, into the white community.

The county ambulance would pick you up, but if you didn't have any money, they wouldn't provide a way home. You were literally stuck out there until someone you knew could come give you a ride. So we decided to provide an ambulance service.

The way we got the money was through the Episcopal Diocese. They gave us the grant to start the service. We actually had the ambulance before we had the training. So we let people know that it was coming and that we would be fully certified, like any other ambulance.

When we first applied to the county for the training, they tried to put up roadblocks and not let us in. The training program was run by a Dr. Street, the medical examiner, who taught all the classes and he was against us getting in. But we were determined, and eventually they allowed us to be trained, but made us take classes two or three cities over from us. They tried to frustrate us by spacing out the classes by several weeks to slow us down, and making us have to hustle for transportation and gas money to get there. They were hoping we would just give up, but we were determined and that wasn't going to be the case. We finally completed the program and got on the road. The community support was off the hook. We got call after call, after call. We weren't asking anyone for anything. We took people to the hospital and back from the hospital and provided supplies without a charge. However, if they could afford a donation, we would accept that.

Everything was free. We got our supplies mainly from the hospital. When we brought a patient in, they would replace the supplies that were used. Some things we had to buy, but most we were able to get from the hospital. The ambulance service was renowned because we could go where the regular ambulance services were afraid to go. Everyone in the community knew us, and it wasn't like some stranger coming to your house to get you after you shot somebody. I saw people shot, and when the county ambulance came, they wouldn't get in it. They waited till we came. One night, it was crazy. This guy had shot somebody and was standing at the top of the steps with the gun. The police and ambulance were down here telling him that if he doesn't put down the gun, they are going to shoot him. He says, "you might as well shoot me then, because you ain't taking him out of here." Then we pull up and the cops say, "Get out of the way! Get

out of the way!!" We don't pay them no attention. We walked right up there and talked to him. He gave the gun up and came right on down. We had several instances of that type of thing.

So how did people make it through the program?

Papa Doc came to the program and could not read or write. His first priority was learning to read and right. He could talk. He talked non-stop. He was determined to work on the program with us. Everytime you saw him, he had his head down in a book. And he did it. The other drivers were sometimes leary of riding with Doc, because if we had to turn the sirens on, he got kind of hyper. I could deal with it, so consequently, he rode with me all the time. During this whole period, I was in college. I actually used to take the ambulance to school with me in the morning. At one time, my girlfriend, my six children, three of my brothers and me were all staying at the Panther office, so that I could drive the ambulance 24 hours a day.. At that time, there was nobody else around to drive it. Some people who had been trained in the program were slackers. People would say they were dedicated to something, but when things get rough they aren't so dedicated anymore. They want to be there when it looks easy and you are getting all the praise. They newspapers are there and all. Then a few of them had to go because their parents were elderly and they had to go to help their parents.

In the mornings, Doc would ride with me to school and we would park next to my classes. Doc would sit in the ambulance with the radio on. I had it set up with my professors that if Doc put on the siren, I could just get up and leave class. I had to go. Because people would actually wait for us. The college was on the other side of town, but people would wait, even to have babies. They would rather wait for us than get in the county ambulance. They just treated people shabby. And the hospital was away from the community and people had no way to get back. There wasn't even very good bus service. They knew that we would come back and bring people home. If they were waiting and needed to get back to care for their children or whatever, they would call and we would get up out of our beds and go bring them back home. We may not have taken them, but we would go get them. As a matter of fact, the hospital was so happy with that, if someone didn't have a way home, they would ask them, "Did you all call the Panther office?"

I drove for the program from 1974 to 1975. I think the ambulance was eventually sold, but I am not really sure. The person who had the final disposition of the ambulance was Nelson.

What would you tell people about your experience? What you were doing is what the Party eventually wanted to do. To send people back to school

to get skills and eventually come back and use them in the community. We should have done that on a larger scale.

I think there was a directive that came down from Central saying that people needed to get their education. I think that is how Larry wound up going to Winston-Salem State.