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Tel: 01225 826230 / 821459
Mobile: 07557 756658 (office hours)

Ruh-tr.communicationsteam@nhs.net
www.ruh.nhs.uk
<https://twitter.com/RUHBath>

Media Release

RUH unveils mural celebrating African women in healthcare

A mural celebrating African women in healthcare is now on display at the Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust.

The artwork is a product of a three-year pioneering research project by the Young Historians Project – a non-profit organisation formed by young people of African and Caribbean descent.

This inspired Heritage Interpreter and Artist Michele Curtis to set up a studio on the hospital site to create the painting during October's Black History Month, with assistance from Consultant Artist Nadia Lloyd.

The colourful mural features four African women with local connections to healthcare – including current RUH staff member Olugbemisola Kolade.

RUH Chief Executive Cara Charles-Barks: "We're so grateful for this inspiring and thoughtful gift.

"I'm so pleased we'll have the beautiful mural here as a daily reminder of how important our history is and the African women who have contributed to this.

"Our diversity makes us stronger, and it's vital we continue working on initiatives to welcome staff from all backgrounds and support people to further progress in their careers with us."

This work by the Young Historian's Project was funded by the Heritage Fund, and aimed to expand understanding of the history of African women in the NHS and in healthcare more generally.

The extensive research has resulted in a docu-series, an online research hub, an e-book, a podcast – and the RUH's commemorative mural.

The Young Historians said: “We at the Young Historians Project are proud to unveil the first mural for our project, A Hidden History: African women in the British health service, at Royal United Hospital Bath.

“We’ve been extremely lucky to have commissioned Michele for the mural, who’s perfectly interpreted our ideas and research, and transformed them into a beautiful art piece. We hope this work inspires more people to engage with and research the history of African women in Britain’s healthcare sector, to ensure it is no longer a ‘hidden’ history.”

RUH Transformation Project Manager Olugbemisola Kolade is featured in the mural with other important women from healthcare history:

- Princess Tsehai Selassie who lived at Bath’s Fairfield House when her family was in exile from Ethiopia. She used her time in England to train as a children’s nurse.
- Bijou Bidwell from Sierra Leone who went on to be a prominent nurse and social justice campaigner after studying nursing at the Bristol Royal Infirmary (BRI)
- Hannah Jawara, from Gambia, who also studied nursing at the BRI before later co-founding a Gambian organisation promoting education for girls.

Mural artist Michele Curtis said: “It’s been an absolute honour to work with the Young Historians Project to create this mural and help their vision materialise. I champion this project and I’m very excited to be a part of its evolution.”

The mural is now on display in the hospital’s main Atrium.

Ends

Notes to Editor:

More information about the women featured in the mural:

Princess Tsehai Selassie

Princess Tsehai, the fourth child of Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 1919. From 1935, Italy - ruled at the time by Mussolini’s fascist regime - launched an invasion of Ethiopia, and the Royal Family fled to Bath, England and ruled in exile at Fairfield House. At just 15, Princess Tsehai gave an impassioned plea to the League of Nations on behalf of her besieged home nation. This garnered her international fame. Tsehai continued to speak on peace and use her status positively. She gave a speech for the Women’s Peace Crusade, and was the only woman to speak at the Conference on African Peoples, Democracy and World Peace in 1939, held in London. As a sponsor in the creation of the Ethiopian Women’s Welfare Work Association (EWWWA), she worked to ensure the expansion and provision of health and welfare to Ethiopian people. During the family’s exile, Princess Tsehai pursued her passion for healthcare and acquired training to bring back to Ethiopia in hope it would benefit her people. She completed her training at Great Ormond Street Hospital, and later Guy’s Hospital, becoming a state registered children’s nurse. Once the Royal Family were able to return to Ethiopia in 1941, she married Lieutenant-General (later Brigadier-General) Lij Abiye Abebe, and moved with him to Welega Province when he was appointed governor there. Tragically, the Princess died following complications during childbirth in 1942. Emperor Haile

Selassie founded the Princess Tsehai Memorial Hospital in her memory, which also served as a nursing school until the Ethiopian Revolution in 1974.

Bijou Bidwell a.k.a. 'Aunty Bijou'

Bijou Bidwell was born on the 29th of March 1927 in Freetown. Growing up, she was taught at St. Mary's Anglican Primary School and later Methodist Girls High School, where she became school spokesperson. Then known as Bijou Peters, she studied at Bristol Royal Infirmary and Kings College Hospital to pursue a career in nursing, soon becoming a State Registered Nurse (SRN) and later a State Certified Midwife (SCM) from 1947. 'Aunty Bijou' as she soon became known, would prove a dedicated and talented nurse, rising to the level of Nursing Sister at the Royal Victoria Hospital (today the Edward Francis Small Teaching Hospital) in 1955, before marrying Dr Ernest Bidwell in 1956. The Bidwells had two daughters, Oremie and Alaphia. Aside from nursing, Aunty Bijou had a love of gardening and her dogs, and was an avid writer. She wrote for a range of Gambian newspapers such as Daily Observer, where she used her voice to speak for the voiceless, particularly on issues of gendered violence and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Even as she grew older, her passion for fighting injustice and standing up for the marginalised did not waver. Her legacy lives on through the foundations she laid for future activists who work to end practices such as FGM to this day.

Hannah Jawara (nee Mahoney)

Hannah Jawara (nee Mahoney) was born in Gambia in 1924. She was the daughter of Sir John Mahoney, the first speaker of the Gambian Legislative Council. From 1942 to 1946 she worked as a nursing assistant at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Banjul, Gambia. The following year, she travelled to England to study nursing at the Bristol Royal Infirmary qualifying as a State Registered Nurse (SRN) in 1950. Upon her return, she was appointed superintendent of the Basse Health Centre. In 1955 she married Gambia's future prime minister Dawda Jawara. But Hannah had her own political ambitions and in 1960, she became the first woman to stand for election to the House of Representatives, where she placed third. Hannah was also an activist for women's rights. She co-founded the Gambia Women's Federation which promoted education for girls. After separating from her husband, she turned to literature, publishing the feminist play 'Rebellion' under the pseudonym Ramatoulie Kinteh. Her works focused on Gambian women and culture. She died in London in 1981.

Olugbemisola Kolade

Olugbemisola (Olu) Kolade, was born in Britain and moved to Nigeria at the age of six. She has spent the majority of her life thus far in Nigeria and was educated there. After graduating with a degree in Computer Science she worked in software consultancy for a number of years. She also married and had two children while living in Nigeria. In 2015, at the age of 35, she moved back to the United Kingdom - a part of her had always wanted to return. Upon her arrival in the UK she began working at the Royal United Hospital, Bath as Project Support Officer, assisting on projects. She has continued to progress as a member of the administrative and clerical staff, and currently holds the role of Transformation Project Manager. She aspires to continue to develop in her career and make a difference in the NHS, supporting changes and improvements that will deliver better outcomes to patients and staff.

About the Young Historians Project:

YHP is a non-profit organisation formed by young people of African and Caribbean descent, working to encourage other young people to engage with Black British history. YHP works on dynamic projects, documenting pivotal and often overlooked historical moments. We hope that through this and future projects more young people of African and Caribbean heritage will rediscover history and develop the skills to become the historians of the future. For more information, and to access our learning resources, visit: younghistoriansproject.org Each one, Teach one

About the artist:

Chair:
Alison Ryan

Chief Executive:
Cara Charles-Barks



Heritage Interpreter and Bristol based artist, Michele Curtis painted this mural with assistance from consultant artist Nadia Lloyd. Michele is the artist and architect behind the Seven Saints of St. Paul's creative and digital place making project, and the Iconic Black Britons initiative developed to celebrate Black British history through art. This isn't just Black History; this is Britain's History!

About the RUH:

The Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust provides acute treatment and care for a catchment population of around 500,000 people in Bath, and the surrounding towns and villages in North East Somerset and Western Wiltshire. The Trust provides 759 beds and a comprehensive range of acute services including medicine and surgery, services for women and children, accident and emergency services, and diagnostic and clinical support services. For more information about the Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust visit:

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Everyone
Matters
Working
Together
Making a
Difference