

Black History Month: Thelma Brown Pendleton, RN, BS

Celebrating Black History Month

Throughout February, Galter Library will be participating in [Black History Month](#) by sharing short biographies of Black graduates and faculty from Northwestern's past. We join institutions across the United States in recognizing the achievements and contributions of Black Americans to our society and culture, while also acknowledging the oppressive role our institution has played, both locally and as part of a societal system, in prejudice and discrimination against Black Americans.

Thelma Brown Pendleton, RN, BS, 1910-1998

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Thelma Brown Pendleton was born on January 30, 1910, in Rome, Georgia, to John O. Brown, who moved to Gary, Indiana, to work in a steel mill when Thelma was 5, and Susie Baisden, who worked as a laundress. By 1930, Pendleton was living in Chicago and attending the nursing school of Provident Hospital.¹ In 1931 Pendleton graduated and spent the next 14 years working as a nurse in Chicago, first at the Rosenwald Foundation, a philanthropic organization started by Sears, Roebuck and Company owner Julius Rosenwald; the Chicago Visiting Nurse Association; and finally at Provident Hospital, where she was also president of the nursing school's Alumnae Association. During her training to become a nurse, her younger brother passed away from spinal meningitis at the age of 15. His loss had a significant impact on Pendleton as she credited his struggle and eventual death as her inspiration to pursue a career in physical therapy.

After years of service in public health, Pendleton secured a scholarship from the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (better known as the March of Dimes) and enrolled in Northwestern University Medical School's physical therapy program in July 1945. Prior to 1945, the program denied the applications of Black health science students because the school could not ensure equal clinical opportunities. The Chicago Visiting Nurse Association was the first organization to provide clinical positions to Black PT students on the condition that they were also trained nurses. Thus, Thelma Brown Pendleton and Magnolia Bates became the first Black students accepted to the physical therapy program because they were both trained public health nurses.² While at Northwestern, Pendleton was voted as the best clinician in her class. Upon her graduation, she became the 5th formally trained Black physical therapist in the country.³ *Image at right: Pendleton, circa 1946, from the Records of the Department of Physical Therapy and Human Movement Sciences, Galter Library Special Collections*



In March 1947 she married insurance salesman George W. Pendleton, and shortly after graduation Pendleton returned to work at Provident Hospital where she established a physical therapy program, which she ran until 1955. She was also making a name for herself in the larger physical therapy community: in 1952 she was selected to join the Physical Therapy Examining Committee of the Illinois State Department of Registration and Education, becoming its first Black member. She also published an article, "[Physical Therapy in a Small General Hospital](#)," in the journal *Physical Therapy*.

After leaving Provident in 1955, Pendleton continued her work as a leading pediatric physical therapist in Chicago. She first worked at Parents Association Incorporated, which ran the South Side Training Center for children with cerebral palsy, where she devised many tools and methods to help the children live more independently. In an article in the *Chicago Defender*, the chairman of the Center referred to Pendleton as "the finest [physical therapist] in the country" who the children fondly called "Penny."⁴ She also worked at United Cerebral Palsy of Greater Chicago's Piper Portal Schools and she spent the last years of her career at La Rabida Children's Hospital, where she was chief physical therapist. Throughout this time she continued her connection with Northwestern by regularly supervising clinical instructor education programs.

Pendleton nominally retired in 1975 but she kept active, personally and professionally, in her later years. She continued working part-time as a physical therapist at various schools and hospitals in the city, co-authored a 1981 book *Patient Positioning: A Handbook for Those Directly Involved in Patient Care*, and even published a cookbook, *Low Budget Gourmet: A Cookbook That Teaches Thrift*, in 1977.

Thelma Brown Pendleton died in Chicago on September 30, 1998. In the early 1990s, the Support Organization for Minority Physical Therapists had recognized Pendleton's importance in the field with its Evans-Pendleton Student Scholarship Fund (The fund's other namesake, Vilma Evans, PT, EdD, was another of the first Black physical therapists in the country). In recent years, many organizations, including the [American Physical Therapy Association](#) and the [Illinois Physical Therapy Association](#), have acknowledged her legacy as a pioneer in the field of physical therapy.

Endnotes

1. Provident was founded in 1891 by Northwestern graduate [Daniel Hale Williams](#), MD, as the first Black-owned and operated hospital in the country.
2. The story of integrating this program began earlier, when, in the spring of 1944, Rosa W. Morgan and Margaret S. Pearson (BS, 1941), applied to the physical

therapy program and were denied because “Northwestern University Medical School lack[ed] facilities for training Negro students in Physical Therapy.”¹ Integration was not just a problem at Northwestern: predominantly white schools often denied the applications of Black health science students because the schools could not always ensure clinical opportunities equal to what was available to white students. Morgan and Pearson engaged several civil liberty organizations to help press their case to Northwestern, but were unable to alter the decision, even though there was an urgent need for physical therapy technicians to treat wounded soldiers returning from the Second World War.² After Morgan and Pearson were denied admission, Gertrude Beard, PT, and John Coulter, MD, co-founders and head administrators of the Physical Therapy program, worked to find hospitals that would provide training opportunities for Black physical therapy students.

1. Alex A. Day, MD, Assistant Dean, letter to Mrs. Margaret S. Pearson and Mrs. Rosa W. Morgan, March 21, 1945.

2. F. H. Krusen, "The future of physical medicine: with special reference to the recommendations of the Baruch Committee on Physical Medicine." *JAMA*. 1944; 125(16):1094. Doi:10.1001/jama.1944.02850340019007

3. Rosa W. Morgan would go on to receive her PT degree from Northwestern in 1954.

4. Throughout her career, Pendleton was profiled many times by local and not-so-local newspapers. In 1955, while she was working at Provident, the [Chicago Daily Tribune](#) stated that “among doctors, and patients, she has achieved a reputation for her extraordinary skills as a physical therapist...enhanced distinctly by the authoritative articles she has written on the subject for professional magazines.” The [Baltimore Afro-American](#) included a feature about her work with children with cerebral palsy in 1961.

Selected References

Cofield, Ernestine. "[Hope for the Handicapped.](#)" *Chicago Defender*. May 4, 1960.

"[Mrs. Thelma Pendleton cited for work in cerebral palsy.](#)" *Baltimore Afro-American*. November 25, 1961.

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