

A Pioneering Cardiothoracic Surgeon

Rosalyn Scott, MD, recalls the challenges of academic medicine and motherhood.

IN 1977 ROSALYN SCOTT, MD ('74), became the first African American woman in the country to start residency training in cardiothoracic surgery. During the interview at Boston University School of Medicine, the department head offered her the job if she could start that July. Although she had a toddler at home and had just learned that she was pregnant again, and had still to complete her general surgery residency, she took the job for a very practical

reason: "I didn't want to lose this opportunity." Later she found out that if her boss had known she was pregnant, he would not have hired her.

"It was not so hard to do surgery when you are nine months pregnant," Dr. Scott admits. "It turned out that the chair of surgery was equally rotund," she adds with a wry smile. "People asked if I could reach the operating table. I told them that Dr. Williams could and I didn't think I would ever be as large as Dr. Williams. I could always borrow his scrubs if necessary!"

Dr. Scott had her baby, finished her training, and went on to the University of Texas Medical School in Houston as an assistant professor of surgery. In 1983 she joined the University of California, Los Angeles, and the Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science, where she spent most of her career as chief of the division of cardiothoracic and vascular surgery.

At a recent interview, in dark slacks and a bright coral-red jacket, umber beads at her throat, dark hair cropped short, Dr. Scott recalled the challenges of motherhood as a surgery resident and then later as an academic surgeon, when life was never predictable. "When my girls were young, I'd never say no, but I'd always say, 'Let's have a fallback plan.'"

A consummate diplomat, Dr. Scott will not comment about the demeanor of her colleagues when she was first starting out,

Dr. Rosalyn Scott in the medical simulation center at Dayton VA Medical Center in Ohio.





SIGNS OF THE TIMES:
At NYU Langone, nearly half of new surgical faculty are women. Since becoming interim-chair of the Department of Surgery in 2005, now-Chair H. Leon Pachter, MD, has recruited 39 new faculty members, 18 of whom are women, shown surrounding him in a recent photo.

except to say that there was a lot more “throwing of instruments” back then. Colleagues describe Dr. Scott—a founding member of both the Association of Black Cardiovascular and Thoracic Surgeons and the Society of Black Academic Surgeons—as a fearless and thoughtful leader in a profession dominated by men.

“I thought, here’s this field, heart surgery, which is absolutely male dominated, and she stands out in a second as being completely different and wonderfully creative, and always wise beyond her years,” says Peter Greene, MD, of Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, who got to know Dr. Scott in the mid-1980s through the Society for Thoracic Surgeons, when they were both young heart surgeons.

“Often the people who aspire to leadership do so in a bloodthirsty fashion—there’s a lot of stepping on one another to advance—I never saw her do it or heard anybody say or suggest it,” says Dr. Greene. “She’s used to going into a field like cardiothoracic surgery, which is very old school and not diverse, and being comfortable there herself and guiding it along a better path.”

One of those she guided was trauma and critical care surgeon Anthony Charles, MD, a Nigerian native, who, when Dr. Scott took him under her wing, had just arrived in Los Angeles from the United Kingdom. “She facilitated my whole academic career. She was incredible,” says Dr. Charles, now an assistant professor of surgery at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine.

When Dr. Charles started his job search, Dr. Scott told him, “I think you should look at North Carolina. I’m going to call up the chair and tell him you’re coming.” At the time Dr. Charles wasn’t even considering North Carolina. “I already had two other job offers,” Dr. Charles says with a laugh. “But she was right.”

A native of Newark, New Jersey, and the only child in a family of medical professionals, Dr. Scott always knew she

wanted to be a physician. Her uncle, Arthur Falls, MD, was a thoracic surgeon, who, in the 1920s, worked at Provident Hospital in Chicago, the only hospital in the city that accepted African American physicians and patients. He later became president of that hospital. Her father, Roy Proctor, DDS, had gone to dental school at New York University College of Dentistry. “I’d always heard about NYU,” she says. He was 48 when she was born and had his first heart attack when she was in the third grade. But he lived long enough to see her go to medical school, urging her to become a heart surgeon because he believed that it was a good niche for his daughter.

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Before attending NYU School of Medicine, Dr. Scott majored in chemistry at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. “There were 5,000 men on campus and about 100 women,” she says. “I started in the first class that had a place for women to stay on campus. Now there’s a female president who is African American.”

Despite the increasing numbers of women in many medical fields cardiothoracic surgery remains an almost exclusively male club. In 2009 women made up only 3.3 percent of the membership of the Society of Thoracic Surgeons. “I think it is clear that women have had a harder time in the field than men, though opportunities are a little better now,” Dr. Scott says. “Until you’re 20 to 30 percent of a field, you’re at a disadvantage.” African American women cardiothoracic surgeons are rarer still, with fewer than a dozen working in the U.S. today. *continued on page 32*