



LOCAL BLACK ORGANIZER PROJECT

Cheri
Briggs –
Spring
2023
Cohort
Network
Delaware's
Ella
Josephine
Baker
Black
Organizers
Group

Jane Evelyn Mitchell (née, Watson) was born in 1921 in Coatesville, Pennsylvania to Sara and Elmer Watson and grew up in Wilmington, Delaware. Mitchell graduated from the all-Black Howard High School 's school of nursing training at Provident Hospital in 1944. Mitchell wanted to come back to Delaware to work, but couldn't find employment. She was told by hospitals in the state that they did not hire Black nurses. None of the hospitals besides the sanitarium (an institution for the treatment and convalescence of individuals with chronic diseases, such as rheumatism, tuberculosis, neurological disorders, or mental disorders) in Delaware would hire her. So, she worked at the Labor Camps for Foreign Labor – Department of Labor because it was a government job until she found work at a Jewish hospital in Philadelphia where she took care of white patients.



In 1949, Dr. Mesrop A. Tarumianz who was looking for nurses with a background in psychology, hired Mitchell to come work for him at the Governor Bacon Health Center. The brand-new Governor Bacon Hospital intended to have segregated patients. There were 4 nurses total (she was the only Black; the rest were white). Mitchell was the first Black nurse to work in a Delaware hospital. She was also the first Black nurse to work with patients of all races in a state hospital.



This occurred because one open building never had any Black patients in it, so she ended up taking care of white patients after all. And she had to pretend when visitors and dignitaries came that she wasn't taking care of white patients – go stand in the hall or back to the Black building. But since there were only a few nurses there, they all took care of all the patients.



She had to get her emotional and social needs taken care of outside of the working community. She never had friends at work, other than Littleton. Jane and Littleton were high school sweethearts and married in 1943. As an aside, Littleton spent his entire career as a teacher/counselor at the Governor Bacon Health Center in Delaware City and was the first African American teacher to instruct white students. He also refused to hide in the kitchen, as they instructed, when the dignitaries came to visit.



As soon as UD opened its doors, she enrolled and began to study for her baccalaureate degree. She was amongst the first Black students to be able to do that. They did not have a BSN degree at that time, so she got her baccalaureate degree in science. The authorities at work would change her schedule around so that she would be absent from class, when the knew that she had to be at class at a certain time. But she was a rebel and she would just go to class anyhow.

One other time a new Director of Nursing, DON, came and suddenly changed her shift after her having worked the same shift for years. She was the supervisor at night, and they changed her shift to 3 PM -11 PM. So, Jane told her that she wasn't going to work the changed shift. The DON told her that "you either work the new shift or you take that gate" (walk out the door). Jane said that she wasn't taking

that gate either.

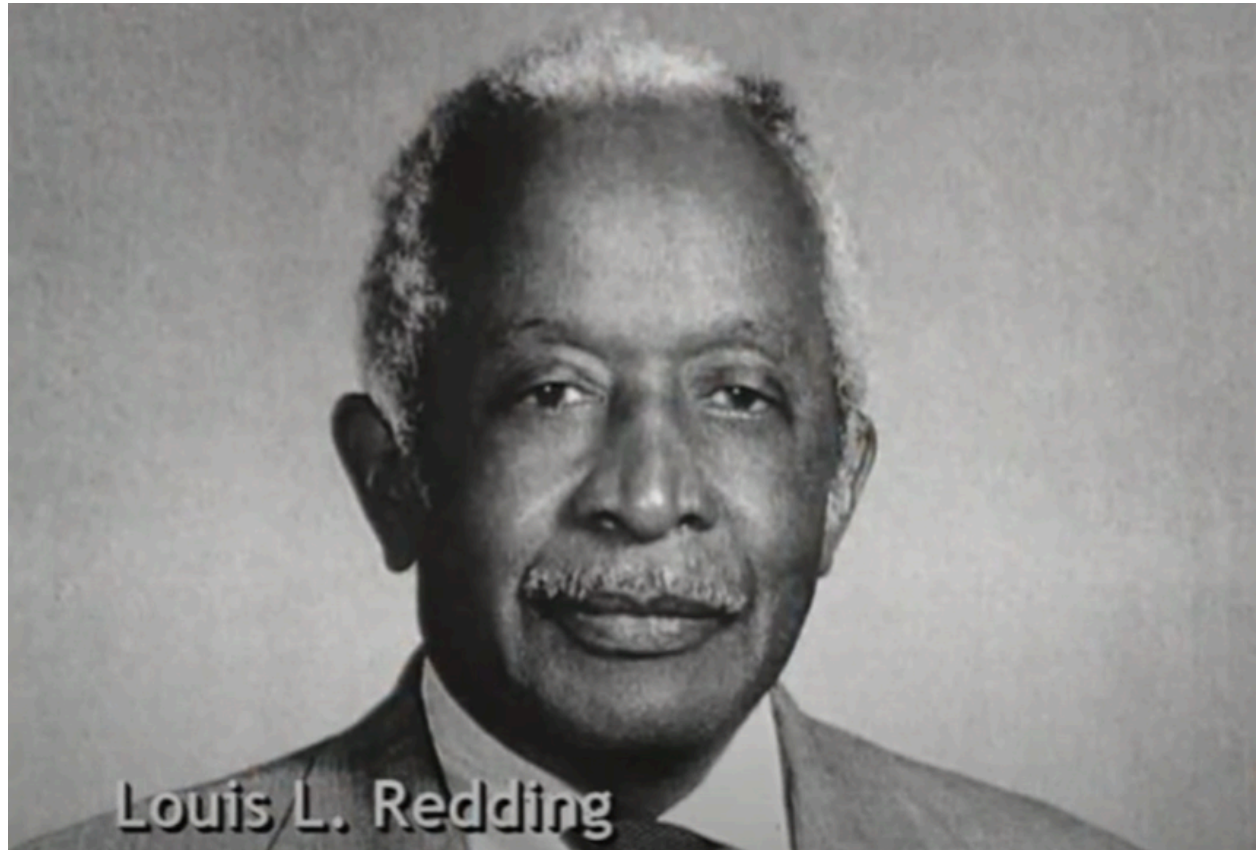


During those years, at the University of Delaware, a 1-year residency on campus was required to get your baccalaureate degree. She took a 1-year leave of absence, LOA. But, they held that against her also. Even though she was on LOA, she came back every weekend to work. She fully intended to come back to her job because she was the supervisor and was the only person with a baccalaureate degree. However, they didn't want give her the job back – because they thought that she wanted to take the DON job. Jane really didn't want to. She planned to do something better than Governor Bacon Health Center.

Jane stayed there until she got the request from Delaware State Hospital to go there to work and be in charge (first as a supervisor, then promoted to be the Assistant Director of Nursing). It was a state-of-the-art building for psychiatric patients built in 1963. When Jane arrived in 1949, she noticed that all of the patients where white and none of her own people were allowed to be admitted to the new shiny hospital. The Black patients were housed in the annex part of the main building and were mistreated – unbathed, hair not combed, restrained, sitting in their own excrement.

However, upon her appointment in 1963, the hospitals were still segregated. She was ready to immediately Louis Redding, a civil rights attorney, asked her stay because in 1964, they were going to desegregate all hospitals in the state of DE. Her association with Louis Redding was through her husband, Littleton. Littleton served as president of the Delaware State Branch of the NAACP battling for the equal rights of African Americans and other disenfranchised people in the State. He worked with

Louis L. Redding, the noted civil rights attorney and his close friend, addressing issues of housing, public accommodations, education and voting rights. Louis knew that the government gave grants to institutions to desegregate and threatened to take away their funds if they didn't do so.



Since Jane knew all the DONs in the state, she was able to see where the Black patients were housed. Down state (Milford Hospital, Nanticoke Hospital, Kent General Hospital), Black patients were all housed in the basement. Their heads were hitting the pipes in the basement and it was dingy. Regardless of their ailment – maternity, surgery, infectious disease, everyone was in the basement. In the city, Wilmington Hospital and Saint Francis Hospital, they were housed in separate wards.

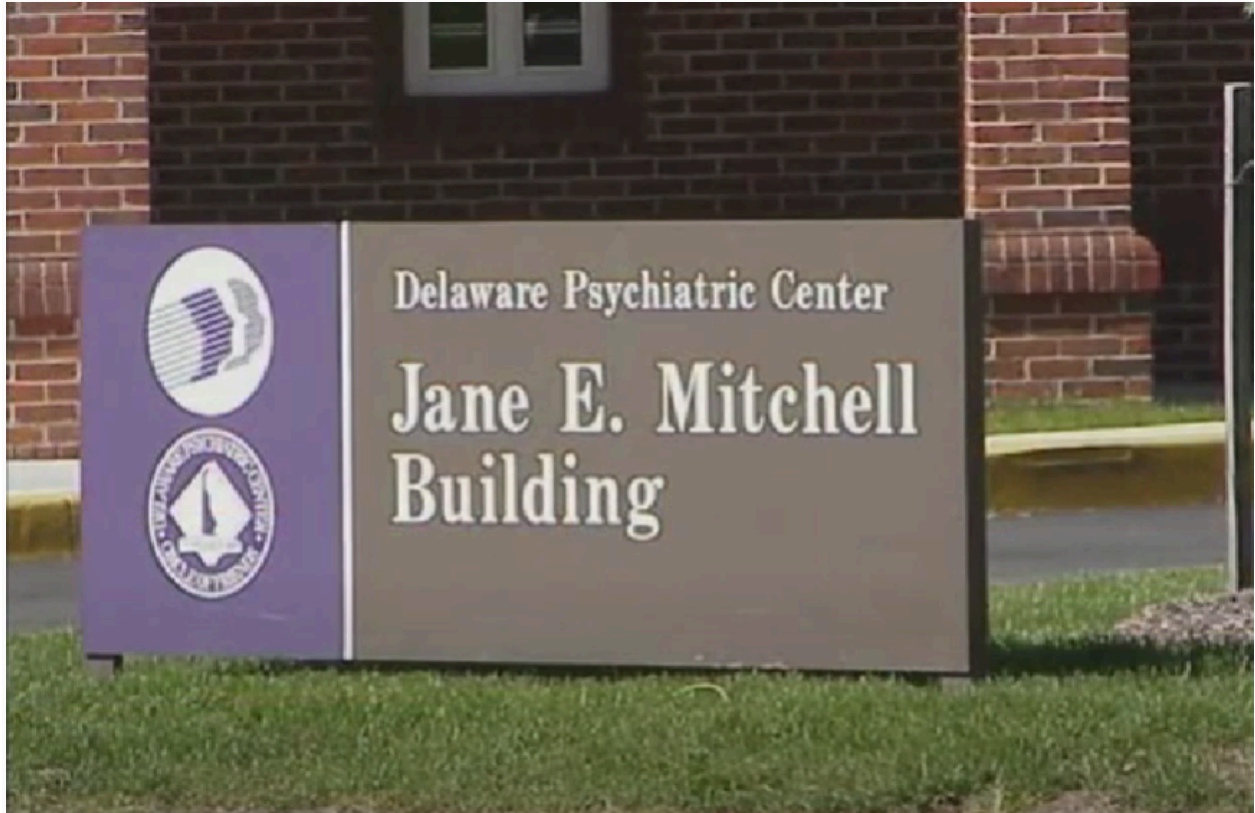
Patients didn't have a problem with desegregation at all. The staff were the ones who had a problem with it. Jane had all white staff and the physicians were all white. She was literally, the only Black person of authority in the building. Every day, one physician would ask her "what is your job here"? and every day, she would answer him.



There was a big write up in the paper when Jane became the Assistant Director of Nursing, ADON. However, the problems began when the DON left. There were 3 ADONs at the time. Jane and one other had a baccalaureate degree. And the 3rd had no degree. Many didn't think that a Black person should attempt to be the DON, including the outgoing DON (who Jane thought was her friend). Finally, the vote on the appointment went to the Board of Trustees to approve it and they did.

After that she didn't have too many problems from staff, other than some of the doctors who didn't want to recognize her and her title. Jane earned her Master's degree in 1969 from Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland. She remained the DON for 11 years until she retired in 1979. She continued to work as a volunteer after her retirement where she served as vice president of the Delaware Nurses Association, a member of the Delaware State Board of Nursing, and served of president of that board.

A new addition to the Psychiatric Hospital was added in 1998 and named "the Jane Mitchell building.". She was nominated by staff to have the building named after her which is ironic because for many years, the staff gave her so much resistance. Jane later learned that the professional staff did not do the nominating. The non-professional staff (attendants, orderlies, housekeepers, etc.) voted her name on the building.



In March 2000, Mitchell was inducted into the Hall of Fame of Delaware Women.

Jane Evelyn Mitchell (Watson) died Saturday, November 13, 2004 at home with her loving husband, Littleton, by her side.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_pv-Huea2eA

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_E._Mitchell#:~:text=Jane%20Evelyn%20Watson%20Mitchell%20\(1921,civil%20rights%20activist%20and%20volunteer.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_E._Mitchell#:~:text=Jane%20Evelyn%20Watson%20Mitchell%20(1921,civil%20rights%20activist%20and%20volunteer.)

<https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/delawareonline/name/jane-mitchell-obituary?id=48466966>