The guest speaker at the 1987 Minority Student Recruitment Day Conference at P&S began with a song. As the overflow crowd of young people listened attentively, Dr. Margaret Morgan Lawrence '40 employed the lyrics of a black gospel hymn to convey her mandate to the would-be doctors in attendance. "Plenty good room in the Father's Kingdom," she sang, "Just take your seat, sit down!"

Dr. Lawrence is a distinguished child psychiatrist whose life and career in medicine are eloquently documented in Balm in Gilead, Journey of a Healer, a recently published biography written by her daughter, Sara Lawrence Lightfoot.

Dr. Lawrence was the third black woman to attend P&S. She and her predecessors, Dr. Agnes O. Griffin '23, a retired ophthalmologist, and Dr. Vera Joseph '36, former Director of the Smith College Health Service, helped open doors that had previously been closed to blacks, and in particular to black women.

"I've been with Columbia a long long time."

Margaret Morgan Lawrence, née Morgan, was born August 19, 1914, at Sloane Hospital for Women in New York City, which was eventually incorporated into the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center. Seventy years later, in 1984, Dr. Lawrence retired as Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Columbia and Director of the Developmental Psychiatry Service of the Division of Child Psychiatry, which she had helped found at Harlem Hospital Center. "So you see," she remarks today with a chuckle, "I've been with Columbia a long long time."

Hers is a truly extraordinary career, in the course of which she became the first child psychiatrist to practice in Rockland County, where she helped found the Community Mental Health Center; she was affiliated with The Child Development Center, the Northside Child Development Center, the City College Educational Clinic, and the Rockland County School Mental Health Unit. She has published two books, Mental Health Teams in the

Margaret Morgan Lawrence at her graduation from P&S, and Dr. Lawrence today.
School (1971) and Young Inner City Families (1975), and is working on a third. She has also published countless articles in the field of child psychiatry. At the same time, Dr. Lawrence succeeded against formidable odds in balancing family and professional life, creating a loving and supportive atmosphere for her three children (today a sociologist, a professor of law, and an educator). Throughout her career, she has labored tirelessly to identify and fortify the ego strength of children of all colors, creeds, and economic backgrounds.

Early Dreams and Disappointments

It is in childhood that dreams, the harbingers of adult aspirations, take shape. Dr. Lawrence’s lifelong “almost reverential” respect for children’s feelings is rooted in a keen memory of her own childhood. Her decision to study medicine came early, at age nine, in response at least in part to the death of her infant brother. It was her good fortune to have supportive parents, her father an Episcopal minister who helped foster the dream, and her mother a school teacher who inspired her daughter by her passion for education.

Though born in New York, she grew up in the small Mississippi town of Mound Bayou and later moved to Vicksburg, Virginia, where educational opportunities were limited. Consequently, her parents sent her back to New York City to live with her grandmother and aunts. She enrolled in Wadeleigh High School, an integrated elite classical public school for girls, where she thrived academically and graduated with honors in Greek. Cornell College accepted her on full scholarship and she assumed, following the successful completion of her undergraduate studies with outstanding grades, that she would attend Cornell Medical School.

In those days, however, the “room” for minorities in medicine was less than “plenty good” and the “seat-taking” not merely a matter of talent and will. She was called in for what she believed would be a routine interview with the dean of Cornell Medical School, who began by telling her that she had done “very well” on a standardized examination, but proceeded thereafter to inform her that the Admissions Committee had regretfully decided not to accept her application. “Twenty-five years ago,” the dean explained with dubious logic, “there was a Negro man admitted to Cornell Medical School and it didn’t work out. . . . He died of tuberculosis.”

Friends urged her to apply to P&S, and helped arrange for an interview. The members of Columbia’s Admissions Committee, though not immune to the prejudicial climate of the period, interviewed the young woman. What would she do, they inquired, if in the course of her clinical training a white patient refused to see her? “I’d go back to my professor and ask for another patient!” she promptly replied, and was duly admitted.

Her medical school days were a happy time, Dr. Lawrence recalls. At P&S she found “the pleasures of disciplined retreat.” And though throughout her four years here she was the only black enrolled, her rapport with her fellow students was for the most part congenial, and she could be herself.

“There were ten women in a class of 104,” Dr. Lawrence recalls. “That was an interesting population! I was proud to belong.”

Women had first been admitted to P&S in 1917, in the wake of World War I, but until the late sixties remained a small minority: “We knew we were fortunate to be there.” Dr. Lawrence affirms, “and we intended to do well. There was a feeling among some of the professors: ‘You’re never going to use your degree! . . . Marriage, children, etc. . . . You’re just taking up room!’ All ten women fulfilled their promise, and went on to pursue active careers as clinicians, academicians, and researchers.

Another important source of spiritual support came from prominent professional women in the Harlem community, teachers like Lucille Spence and Melva Price, and the celebrated physician, Dr. May Edward Chinn. The first black woman to graduate from Bellevue Hospital Medical Center and the first woman intern at Harlem Hospital, Dr. Chinn went on to become a leader in public health. She was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Science degree by Columbia on May 14, 1960. These women were mentors and formidable role models for the young medical student.

An encounter with a Columbia professor also left its stamp. Dr. Charles Drew (1904-1950), the noted medical researcher who helped develop techniques for blood banking, was at the time the only black member of the faculty.

The student and the professor met one afternoon. Dr. Drew asked her about her experience at P&S, “I don’t remember exactly what I told him,” Dr. Lawrence said, “but I do remember his reaction:The only thing you have to do is your best work,” he said. “You do your work and you will succeed, and race is not going to matter.” Though questioning the professor’s opinion, she appreciated his encouragement.

Another Columbia faculty member, Dr. Hattie Alexander, pediatrician and discoverer of the vaccine to combat influenza meningitis, proved an important influence and inspired her promising student to pursue pediatrics.

But when Dr. Lawrence applied for an internship at Babies Hospital, she was rejected because there was no provision for women in the doctors’ residence, and the only alternative, the nursing residence, refused to have her because of her color.

Finding a Professional Niche

Thereafter, she applied for a pediatric internship at Harlem Hospital, and following a rigorous written examination, was accepted. There she received a solid grounding in her primary specialty, “my beloved pediatrics,” as she still refers to it. The
lessons she learned were social as well as medical. She began to perceive "the connections between physical illness and community health," which inspired further study.

In 1943 she earned an M.S. in Public Health from the Columbia School of Public Health, where one of her professors was the well known pediatrician, Dr. Benjamin Spock '29. Under his tutelage, she became aware of the interconnections between physical, social and psychological health. "His exciting and well-integrated vision of the child, the family, the community, and society never left me," she recalls. And years before she was to pursue her formal psychiatric training, "it was Spock who gave me my first firm feeling of being a pediatrician and a child psychiatrist."

With her husband, the late Charles R. Lawrence, Ph.D., a distinguished sociologist, academic, and social activist, she moved back south where he accepted an appointment to teach sociology at Fisk University and she joined the faculty of Meharry Medical College. It was here in the course of her teaching and clinical work that she became deeply sensitive to the psychological dimension of physical illness. "My memory is of practicing a good bit of homespun child psychiatry with my patients and students . . . and realizing: Heh, you ought to be better trained in it if you're going to do it!"

However, pre-Civil Rights Movement America of the late forties could not conceive of a black psychiatrist, and traumatic encounters as a consequence of covert prejudice lay ahead.

The optimal place to train then, as it is now, was the New York Psychiatric Institute. No black had ever been admitted as a resident. However, a move to open the ranks of psychiatry to qualified black candidates was underway, led by, among others, Dr. Viola Bernard (Clinical Professor of Psychiatry Emeritus at P&S, and founder and former Director of the Division of Community and Social Psychiatry at Columbia). Dr. Bernard interceded on Dr. Lawrence's behalf with the Director of the Psychiatric Institute, Dr. Nolan Lewis, and in 1948, she became the first black resident admitted to PI.

That same year she enrolled as the first black trainee at the Columbia Psychoanalytic Center. Having undergone psychoanalysis and fulfilled all the other necessary requirements, Dr. Lawrence eagerly anticipated her certificate of graduation. It was not, however, readily forthcoming.

A false rumor had spread through a series of misunderstandings that Dr. Lawrence did not wish to work with black patients. Consequently, the Director, Dr. Sandor Rapoport, called her in for an interview, at which he advised her, without ever telling her why, that he was withholding her certificate pending "further analysis."

This was the same experience of "depersonalization" she had gone through at the Cornell Medical School interview. Only this time, the racial sting was even more painful. She recalls the incident with anger. In heeding the rumor and never bothering to approach her directly to confirm or deny it, those 'responsible' people were saying to me: 'You don't know who you are! . . . You're nobody! You don't exist!'"

But this time Dr. Lawrence persevered and, with the aid of influential supporters on the faculty, managed to resolve the matter and graduate.

Dr. Lawrence went on to do important work in child psychiatry, to propagate the cause of child mental health, and among other achievements, to develop some of the first child therapy programs in schools, daycare centers, and hospital clinics.

For twenty years she served as Director of the Developmental Psychiatry Clinic at Harlem Hospital, where a co-worker, Dr. Denise Greene, said "she provided the rest of us with an incredible sense of calm when great chaos prevailed." Her unique contribution to psychiatry, suggests Dr. Greene, is "her emphasis on seeking out strengths in children and their families." She still feels most at home in the "playroom" she created in her office in Pomona, New York, where she continues to see a limited number of private patients.

Recipient of The Joseph R. Bernstein Mental Health Award, The Outstanding Women Practitioners in Medicine Award of the Susan Smith McKinney Steward Medical Society, and countless other honors, she has never lost sight of her goals. PW for