



East Texas Daughter

Helen Green

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Raised in poverty in Tyler, Texas, Helen Harris Green went on to become the first black woman admitted into a Dallas school of professional nursing, the first black nurse-manager of the Methodist Hospital of Dallas, the first black department director at Timberlawn Psychiatric Center, the first black president of the Texas Society of Healthcare Educators, the first black to be on the board of directors for the TSHE division of the Texas Hospital Association, and the first black chair of the board of directors of TSHE. In this moving and personal account, she details the battles she fought and insults she endured to reach her professional goals.

Green was blessed with an educated mother who was determined to help her daughter rise beyond the poverty of her childhood and who emphasized that education was the key. Her mother, Willie Raye Harris, was the single greatest influence on Helen and the person most responsible for her success. Her father, less well educated, believed in ruling the family with an iron fist, and her brother ran away from home in rebellion. Willie Raye was able to keep her daughter at home despite the father's harshness. The vivid description of her poor childhood in segregated East Texas is riveting, giving a clear picture of the place and the time.

Married and a mother at an early age, Green never lost her ambition. She studied, in a segregated class, for her certificate as a licensed vocational nurse. While working as an LVN, she applied for admission to professional nursing schools and was consistently turned down for seven years. Finally, she was accepted into the Methodist Hospital of Dallas School of Nursing, where she was clearly an experiment. Green met encouragement and support from the dean and faculty and most of her classmates, but she also endured curiosity, scorn, and rudeness from some professional healthcare workers and some students. At graduation, she was awarded the Florence Nightingale Award for academic and clinical excellence.

Over the years, Green's continuing education—she earned a master's degree in business administration—and her professional success placed great strains on her family. She and her husband, Sed, were periodically at odds and even divorced briefly. Her daughter, Shalimar, distanced herself from the family and developed a drug problem. And her son, Chris, was often saddened by the anger between his parents. Yet much as she worked at her family life, Green could not and would not give up her professional goals, which she felt were necessary for a successful life.

Helen Green's story, told frankly and honestly, reflects the experiences of many black citizens, no matter their profession, during the fifties and sixties and on into the twenty-first century. Her determination and courage are to be admired, her humor and insight to be appreciated, her love and compassion to be shared with the world. This is the story of one East Texas daughter who learned that sticks and stones may break her bones and even slow her progress, but never end it.

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