

EIP

Celebrating Black History Month 2022: Patricia Bath

October is Black History Month in the UK and this year's theme is Time for Change: Action not words. In commemoration, each week we will be profiling a different Black person who has made a significant contribution in a particular technical field. EIP's Diversity Focus Group see this as opportunity to share information and learn about different perspectives and histories.

Week 2

Patricia Bath (1942-2019) was an ophthalmologist and humanitarian who (among other things) developed the 'Laserphaco Probe', which has been used to save the eyesight of millions around the world. The Laserphaco Probe is a medical device which improved on the use of lasers to enable quick, near-painless and more precise treatment of cataracts. Bath was granted a patent for the LaserPhaco probe in 1988, making her the first Black woman to receive a patent for a medical purpose.

Bath grew up in Harlem, New York, and after graduating from Manhattan's Hunter College in 1964 pursued a medical degree at Howard University. While at Howard, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968 inspired Bath to dedicate herself to helping achieve one of King's dreams: the empowerment of people through the Poor People's Campaign.^[1] Bath was instrumental in organising Howard University medical students to provide volunteer health care services to the Poor People's Campaign in Resurrection City in the summer of 1968.

After graduating from Howard, Bath returned to Harlem to do an internship at Harlem Hospital, which had recently become affiliated with Columbia University. During Bath's internship, she observed significantly larger proportions of blind patients at Harlem Hospital (which served a sizable Black community) compared to the patients at the

Columbia University Eye Clinic. Based on her observations, Bath published the first scientific paper showing the higher prevalence of blindness among Blacks in the USA. Following this, Bath pioneered the worldwide discipline of “community ophthalmology”, a volunteer-based outreach to bring necessary eye care to underserved populations.

Bath had a glittering career, becoming the first woman in the US to head an ophthalmology residency programme, lecturing internationally and authoring many scientific papers. Bath has also been recognised for her humanitarian work in the field of ophthalmology by President Barack Obama.

You can read more about Patricia Bath [here](#).

In addition to making notable contributions to ophthalmology, Patricia Bath was a humanitarian and an inspiration to many. She wanted to improve the lives of others, had a strong sense of fairness and was motivated by the unequal outcomes that she witnessed. We can all be inspired by Patricia Bath to take steps to address unequal outcomes which exist today. However, if we want those outcomes to change, we (that’s all of us: allies and ethnic minorities) cannot be passive - we will need to take active steps and work together to make it happen. Time for Change: Action Not Words.

[1]The Poor People’s Campaign was an initiative organised by King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference motivated by a desire for economic justice for poor people in the United States.