

# the best medicine

**Dr. Bertice Berry**  
brings laughter and  
encouragement to  
NCH with her motivational speeches.

>> By Kristin Davis >> Photography by Vanessa Rogers

**I**t's 9:15 a.m. and Dr. Bertice Berry sits in the cafeteria at NCH, eating a piece of raisin bread, sipping her morning coffee and mentally preparing for the motivational speech she would give to more than 100 nursing students, physicians and staff in less than an hour. This was a rare break for the woman whose to-do list is as long as the credentials under her name—comedian, sociologist, author, lecturer and educator, to name a few. In between bites, she jumps up to say hello to a familiar face, ER Audit Specialist Carol Gonzalez, who attended her last speech at NCH a month earlier. “Hi, how are you?” she asks, giving the woman a kind of hug usually reserved for close friends. Gonzalez asks Berry to sign a copy of her novel *Redemption Song*, one of several best-sellers she has written to date. Gonzalez recites a line from Berry’s last speech that she says inspired her:



**Opposite:** Dr. Bertice Berry's speeches inspire and ignite change in her audiences.

“You’re beautiful, you’re wonderful, you’re powerful just as you are.”

Her way with words has brought her nationwide attention: from hosting her own nationally syndicated talk show, *The Bertice Berry Show*, to making guest appearances on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and, most recently, on ABC’s *20/20*.

**T**he only thing more memorable than Berry’s words might be her larger-than-life presence. Dressed all in black, with her dreadlocks pulled neatly into a ponytail, she looks sophisticated but comfortable—in her clothes as well as her skin. The only color in her ensemble is a red and blue beaded necklace, which she jokingly calls her “skinny beads” after someone tells her she looks slim today. But she firmly believes her best accessory is a smile.

“I have a big smile, I can’t help it,” she says, getting up from the table. I follow her faithfully, her shadow for the day as she makes rounds to greet staff members and invite them to today’s speech, titled “From the Patients’ Perspective.” Her sister, Jeanine, follows in close pursuit, moving in what could almost be considered a light jog—a pace she is accustomed to after managing Berry for 13 years.

The two sisters have come a long way from growing up poor with five other siblings in Wilmington, Del.

Never one to let anything stand in the way of her goals, Berry applied to Jacksonville University in Florida after high school, without any idea of how she would pay for tuition.

With financial assistance from a wealthy benefactor who donated to the university,

“You’re beautiful, you’re wonderful, you’re powerful just as you are.”

Berry not only graduated from Jacksonville, but also went on to earn a Ph.D. in sociology from Kent State University at age 26. She eventually taught sociology and statistics at the same university, where she discovered her talent for storytelling and making people feel important—to the world, but more specifically, to her.

“I met you before,” Berry says, having walked just a few steps before recognizing someone else she knew, this time behind the receptionist’s desk. “But I think you’ve been on a vacation since then, you look so tan!”

“Nah, just yard work.”

“That’s a good thing. Do you garden and grow food or just plant? It’s a lucky person that knows that’s important. I’m trying to work up to that.”

But Berry seems to already know what’s important in life. I ask her if she has to go around and talk to people before every speech, as a part of her job, and she immediately corrects me: “I don’t have to. I want to. It helps me get a sense of who they are.”

She leans in, adding: “The people who give wellness to others are often the last to get it. Everyone here gives so much; there is [often] nothing left for themselves.”

She has learned much about hospital employees from observing the staff at the Georgia hospital where her mother passed away from cancer at 87 years old.

**“F**or two-and-a-half years, on and off, we spent most of our days and nights in the hospital,” she recalls.

“And, because I’m a sociologist, what do you do when you have nothing else to do? You make observations and you take notes. Initially, my reason for being there was to make sure she was OK and write down everything everybody was doing.

“I had this mindset that I have to make sure she’s OK because I’ve read the newspaper [articles about healthcare]. But I hadn’t seen up close what was really happening. My notes went from ‘What is that they’re giving her?’ to ‘This woman just came into the room and massaged my mother’s feet. I love her!’”



**Opposite:** Berry catches up with an old friend. **Right:** The hospital staff is in stitches whenever Berry is around.

This is when Berry says she realized that, in difficult times, raising other people's spirits, in turn, helps her raise her own.

She stops to talk to a man with a tattoo stretched across his bicep. Pointing to his arm, she calls out to her sister, conservatively dressed in a collared shirt, business skirt and sharp glasses, "That would look great on you!" The man laughs.

Her sense of humor has not only won her the affection of everyone she has met at NCH; it has also won her awards. She was voted Comedian of the Year by The National Association for Campus Activities, a student services organization of 1,500 colleges and universities, and was also named Campus Lecturer and Campus Entertainer of the Year.

By now it's almost speech time, but she's not quite ready to head back into the cafeteria yet; there are still a few more people she wants to visit.

"You came back for more?" asks Dr. Debra Lopez, a pediatric critical care physician, as Berry walks into her office downstairs at the hospital.

"Who is this, your kids?" Berry asks, pointing to the children in the pictures on Lopez's desk. "You're not old enough to have kids!"

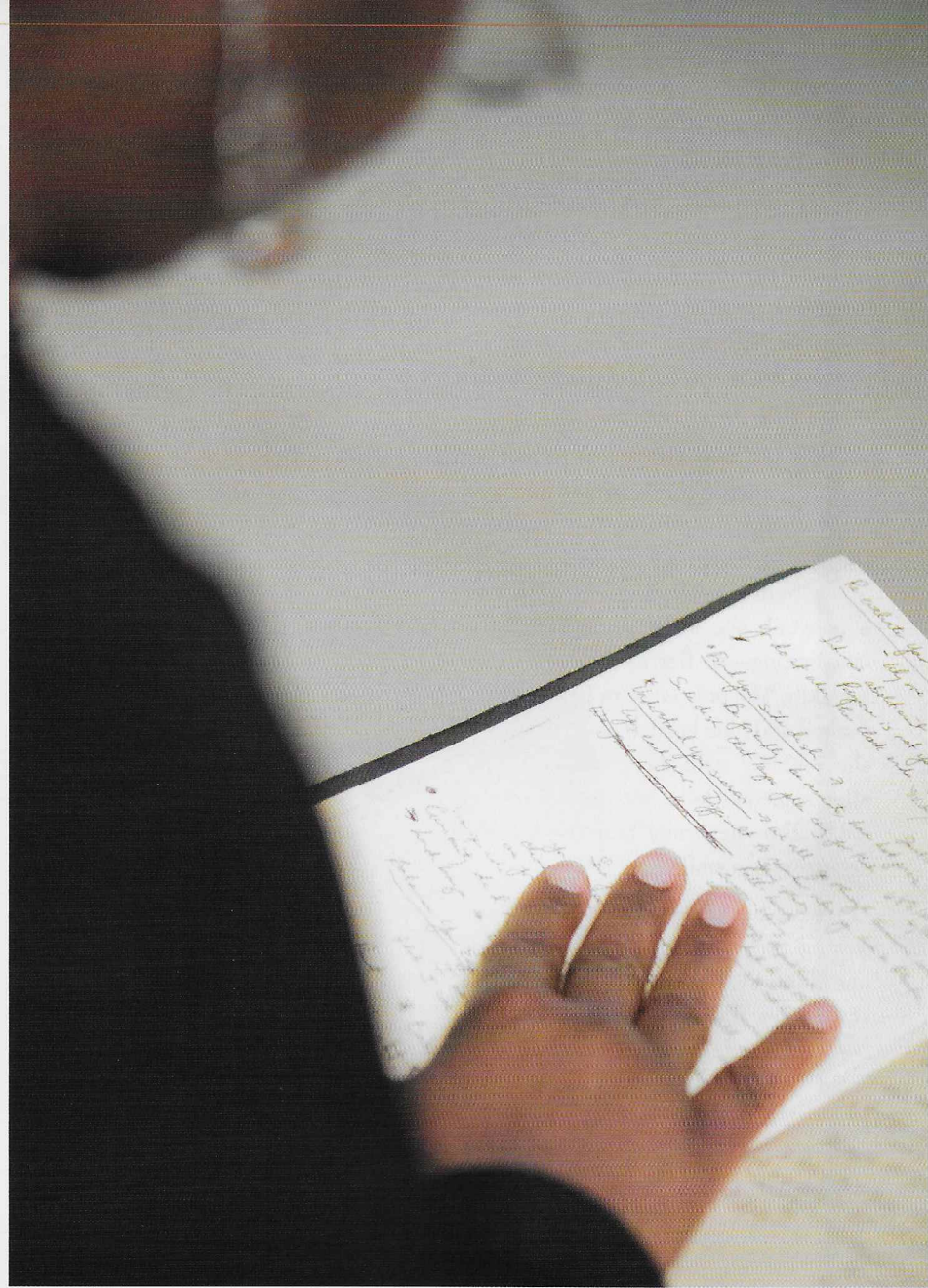
Berry points at another picture in which the woman is dressed up for a night on the town with a group of friends. "Look at you!"

"That's when I'm rested," Lopez replies with a smile.

After they hug goodbye, Berry tells me a story about the last time she visited Lopez. She had complimented Lopez's jacket and, a few days later, she had sent Berry a similar one as a gift.

"We're a combination of everyone we come in contact with every day," she says. "Everybody...we're connected."

By this time, Berry is set to speak in 10 minutes, and we're back to our light-paced jog toward the cafeteria.



**Above:** Before her speeches, Berry takes a moment to review her notes and reflect on the weight her words will carry.

Staff members from all areas of the hospital settle into their seats as we arrive. Berry sits in the front row, putting on her reading glasses and pulling out a notebook. It's the first time since early this morning that I've seen her so quiet and focused, intently studying her handwritten notes on the page.

"I always say a meditation to myself to relax because I get really nervous," she admits. "Because [when I give speeches] it isn't about me. It's about everyone else in the audience."

I search for some encouraging words for her and remember a piece of advice I overheard her giving a young audience member she spoke with earlier: "When you walk with purpose, you collide with destiny." But, since I don't want to steal her material, I stick with "good luck."

Closing her notes and standing confidently, she walks to the podium and adjusts the microphone. It's show time. **NH**