

At Detroit hospitals, everybody 'pulled together'

MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS RECALL THE
OVERFLOWING ER, MAKING ROUNDS WITH
SOLDIERS AND MEDICAL MIRACLES THAT
WEEK

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Unintentional shots fired after the riots

On July 23, 1967, Dr. Marilyn Heins spent the afternoon swimming along Canada's sandy beaches. Her carefree Sunday took a turn when she boated back on Lake St. Clair and spotted smoke.

"We were halfway across the lake and, we're thinking, 'God, that's a lot of smoke.' We didn't have cellphones. We didn't have any news contact," said Heins, now 86. "Then we realized when we got closer that this was something catastrophic. This was the Sunday afternoon that the riots started."

Heins was the head of pediatrics at Detroit General Hospital. On Monday, a citywide curfew prevented her from traveling, so she touched base with the hospital by phone.

By Tuesday, Heins needed to get to the hospital. Driving down Jefferson from her Grosse Pointe home, there were no other cars on the road.

"It was very scary. It was very unusual. It was like a post-catastrophic movie scene because nobody seemed to be living

in or driving in or walking in the city,” she said in a phone interview from Tucson, Arizona, where she resides.

Heins came upon an armored personnel carrier with National Guard soldiers, their rifles out and ready to shoot.

“I’ve never forgotten that moment because I’m very progressive in politics, but when you’re scared out of your wits, to see the uniform and the guns was a protective thing,” she said.

The carrier headed in the direction of the hospital in Greektown, so the then-37-year-old followed safely behind in her sky blue Toyota.

After her arrival at the hospital, Heins soon realized the main disruption was a nursing shortage.

“We were not admitting new patients because of the nursing problem, unless it was really an emergency. The nurses were harassed because they were doing double, sometimes triple, shifts for the first few days, and then we got back to normal once there were no curfews,” she said, adding police transported tired nurses home and brought in replacements.

At the end of the week, Heins and her husband, a veterinarian, decided to “go exploring.”

“We said, ‘Let’s go see some of these burned out neighborhoods we heard of.’ I was almost sorry we went. It was a very sad thing to see,” she said. “... It reinforced my feeling about, like we have to take care of children, we have to take care of poverty.”

In the months after the riots, Heins said she treated several kids injured by gunshots. Guns were more prevalent, as

households sought protection. Yet they were often left in plain sight.

“Some loaded guns were just under the sofa. Some were just on the bedside table, but loaded with little kids in the house,” Heins said.

The worst case she remembers was a 4- or 5-year-old boy who accidentally shot his younger brother.

“He found the gun under the sofa and was just lifting it up, and he killed him,” Heins said. “When I got down to the emergency room, the mother was crying, everybody was crying, including the nurses and doctors.

“And the little boy put his arms around my knees and said, ‘I would never do that to him again.’ Isn’t that a pang in the heart?”