

the way we live

DETROIT FREE PRESS •

TV Therapy:

A California shrink says someday at least one TV or radio station in every major city will be devoted to therapy. Page 4.

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Retirement's a hard job for Ethelene Crockett

By LAURA BERMAN
Free Press Staff Writer

Ethelene Crockett is a dauntless woman. She has a strong voice and a stronger will, and she doesn't give up. In fact, she has made a career out of the business of not giving up. She's very good at it.

Her operating principle is that if you want something badly enough — and if you can communicate that desire to others — what you want can be had.

That's how Ethelene Crockett, a black woman from a poor family who came of age during the Depression, got to college and then medical school.

She intended to go, so she did go. And that was that.

BUT LAST MONTH, Ethelene Crockett — who has been a community leader and practicing obstetrician in Detroit for 30 years — closed her practice and retired. For a woman who remembers that her goal as a young woman was "to save the world," retiring doesn't come easy.

She says she misses her work already, although she has hardly been inactive. She is president of the American Lung Association and last week was at the White House to present President Carter with this year's Easter Seals. Last month, she was in Brussels, addressing an international convention on the subject of tuberculosis.

But Dr. Crockett is 64, and she has cancer, and that is cramping even her style.

In Brussels, while preparing to speak, she realized that something was seriously wrong with

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her. That she was getting sick fast. "If you go to Brussels and you're by yourself and you go to the hotel and find you can hardly make it up the steps, that's scary. I knew then that I couldn't continue to practice."

She hadn't told her husband, Records Court Judge George W. Crockett Jr., she was sick because she was sure he would be upset and wouldn't let her go. "There's some things you just don't say because there's nothing to be done. And he's been as supportive as he can possibly be," she said.

She went into the hospital the day after she returned from Brussels. There is, she says, an even chance that she can be cured, by chemotherapy. "Everyone's going to die. The only thing that I know that you don't know is what I'm probably going to die of — not when," she said. "I'm not wasting any time dreaming about it or dreading it."

SHE TALKED in the living room of her Lafayette Park townhouse, which is crowded with

black art she and her husband have collected over the years. "All of a sudden, people are collecting black art — it's the thing to do. And they'll say, 'Oh, you collect black art,' as if it was a conscious thing. We just bought it when we saw things we liked."

That's how Ethelene Crockett talks — in a blunt, matter-of-fact tone that seems to say there's nothing exceptional about who she is or what she has accomplished. She allows an interview only because she wants people to know about the American Lung Association; because she does want people to know about it, she talks even on the day after a chemotherapy session that has left her weak, tired and "not myself."

Ordinarily, she is a woman of boundless energy. She has somehow had time to work as a practicing physician and to be mother of three children and a civic activist who has spoken out again and again on behalf of women, blacks, children, the poor. She was instrumental in setting up Detroit's Model Cities neighborhood comprehensive health programs. She has served on the Detroit Public Library Commission, and has been active in the public school system. And she's been an officer of the Michigan Cancer Society, president of the American Lung Association — the list continues, but you get the idea.

ALL THIS determination to do good started early in her life. She was nine, she says, when she decided to become a doctor.



Free Press Photo by ED HAUN

A 1972 photo of Dr. Crockett. Now 64, she has cancer, and that is cramping even her style.

See DR. CROCKETT, Page 4C

She's both doctor and patient

DR. CROCKETT, from Page 1C

"A woman who went to church with us was pregnant, and then she swelled up — her fingers were puffy, her face was bloated. And eventually she died. And the two children she was carrying died too. I decided that I would be a doctor. I thought if I was a doctor I wouldn't have let her die," recalled Dr. Crockett, who has expressive eyes and a resonant voice.

Her drive to become a doctor made her less than a lot of fun to be around in school, she says. But she did win a scholarship to the University of Michigan. On her first day there, she met George W. Crockett Jr., who was visiting the home where all the university's black women students stayed. "I didn't think much of him, and he thought even less of me," she says now. "But somehow we got together and it stuck and it stuck for 45 years."

WHEN THEY married, her father made Crockett promise that, if it became financially possible for her to attend medical school, he would send her. "My husband made that promise, and he kept it."

When she was 28, already the mother of three children, she entered Howard University College of Medicine and graduated at the top of her class ("second or third, I can't remember which") three years later.

Unable to get a residency at a Detroit hospital — she was told that the hospitals weren't ready for black doctors — she went to New York, where her husband was defending five communist leaders. "His reputation was besmirched by that, but that didn't stop him. People never understood that he wasn't a Marxist and neither was I. Can't you see someone else's point of view without having to embrace it?"

Eventually, they moved back to Detroit. "We lived in a lower-middle-class neighborhood," she said. "Why did we choose to live there? We didn't choose to — we couldn't live

anywhere else. We were black.

SO THE CROCKETTS raised their family in a lower-middle-class neighborhood where he, an attorney, and she, a doctor, were particularly visible. Also, influential. The Crocketts had rules for their children that the other parents didn't have, but eventually adopted.

"We had a rule that the kids had to come in when the porch light came on," Dr. Crockett said. "But what happened was that as soon as our porch light went on, all the parents on the block would call their children in too."

"I guess we did pretty well because the kids say they could never tell who made the decisions — they could never catch either of us taking opposite sides. We always agreed, at least when we were talking to them."

Her husband, she says, has always been completely supportive of her and her career. She has been fortunate to have a husband who is not afraid of his wife's success. She worked late at night as an obstetrician; he was often going out when she was coming in. But "he never hassled me about the time it took up. Or about medical school. He always knew I was coming home."

BOTH SHE and her hus-

Gas saver

Knight-Ridder Newspapers

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band have been controversial figures in the Detroit community. "He's his own man," she said of Crockett. "He stands up for what he thinks is correct. We have tried not to stand in each other's way. Sometimes, I don't appreciate some of the things he does. Sometimes, I don't agree with him. And when I don't, I'll say, 'I don't think I would do it that way.'"

Both of them have been hit with plenty of criticism. She remembers a newspaper editorial that claimed she had forced the appointment of Clara Jones to head the Detroit Public Library system simply because she was black and a woman.

"They said that I, like my husband, am brilliant and arrogant," she recalled, with obvious pleasure at the recollection. "And that I didn't want my prejudices confused by choices. That, I thought, was hilarious. I never realized I had enough power to swing five votes all by myself."

She smiled and leafed through a New England Journal of Medicine, glancing at it while she talked. She spoke of her illness, of the diagnosis, and the medical procedures involved with a detached and clinical interest. Right now, she's both doctor and patient, and she says she is learning a lot about medicine by being treated.

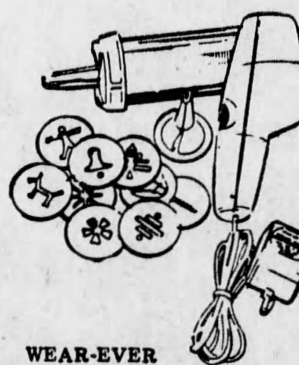
Another female doctor is practicing in Dr. Crockett's old office. "You know, every young lady I have seen in practice, I have asked, 'Where are you going? Don't stop taking science classes.' I have meddled in their lives, called their parents, just to see that they're encouraged to con-

tinue their education. I have gotten some of them very angry with me."

She said she misses her practice already. But not, she's not depressed or scared. Really, she said, she doesn't have time for that.



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