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for and about Women

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SECTION C

Dr. Crockett At the Peak

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BRUSH STREET lobby of Grace Hospital . . . 8:15 a.m. . . . a February morning, but night hasn't yet yielded to day . . . a muggy ice-melting, rain-threatening day.

Admitting clerks slowly push paper and pencils, staring stodgily at people.

Enter Dr. Ethelene Crockett. Tall, broad-shouldered woman with short uncoifed hair. She's in a blue tweed coat with fur-ish collar, and carries a large black purse.

Dr. Ethelene Crockett: Immediately taking hold of a situation. Overwhelmingly. Smiling . . . her mouth small and often seeming to linger near a smirk. Extending her hand to lead you, or an arm to embrace you. Motherly, maybe even grandmotherly.

She's just been named Woman of the Year by Zeta Phi Beta sorority and next Saturday will receive the award. Supreme Court Justice G. Mennen Williams will speak at the award luncheon at the Detroit Hilton.

The designation comes at a time when Dr. Crockett may be at the pinnacle of her career. At 58, she's respected in the medical community as a top-notch obstetrician and gynecologist. She doesn't deliver babies now, but has a private gynecology practice.

She's also on the staff of the Model Neighborhood Comprehensive Health Center — the director of its ob-gyn department and family planning services. In January she began her term of presidency of the Detroit Public Library Commission, is on the boards of directors of United Community Services and Comprehensive Health Planning Council.

THIS MORNING she's in Grace, checking on her patients.

Rounding a corner she meets two doctors.

"I'm going down to Atlanta with George," she says, smiling. "He's giving a Founder's Day address at Morehouse, and they wanted to know if I was coming, which I wasn't. So they let it out — he's getting an honorary doctor's degree. Now it's been a while since George asked me to go with him. We're leaving tomorrow afternoon."

Pride, happiness in her George: Detroit Recorder's Court Judge George W. Crockett Jr., the controversial constitutional law expert.

Free Press Photo by ED HAUN

Dr. Ethelene Crockett: A presence, not just a person.

Off with the overcoat, on with a white lab coat and into the cafeteria. Nearly 8:22. Poached egg on toast, no salt, and coffee is her fare.

"I'm going down to Atlanta . . ." she begins, beaming, again telling of her plans, George's honor. "We'll go on down to Jacksonville, his folks are there."

"I didn't know he was a Southern boy," says one woman. "I'm a Georgia peach, you know."

8:35 AND WE'RE UP to the second floor nurse's station. Dr. Crockett's checking on a patient who has had surgery. First to the chart, then to the room.

"Why aren't you eating better?" she asks, indicating two eggs sitting in a bowl on the tray. "You can't lose weight on me. What we're gonna do is send you out shopping all day to get hungry. No, we're going to send you home."

After a few minutes signing medical records, Dr. Crockett's going up to the fourth floor — it's now 8:55 — where she disappears to see a patient, for a long time. It's 9:13 when she comes out.

"I'm going to send her home and bring her back for surgery. I don't believe in doing her and leaving. We'll do it next week."

9:20 AND WE'RE waiting for an elevator.

"Why did I become a doctor?" Dr. Crockett slowly repeats the question, stares at the floor, and traces an invisible pattern with her toe, as if the floor were sand.

"There's nothing else I ever wanted to do. Of course, I didn't know what it was called, back then.

"When I was a girl, I was, believe it or not, in a choir. We had a young pianist, real young, about 25. She got pregnant, and then along about the seventh month stopped coming to practice. She had convulsions and was taken to the

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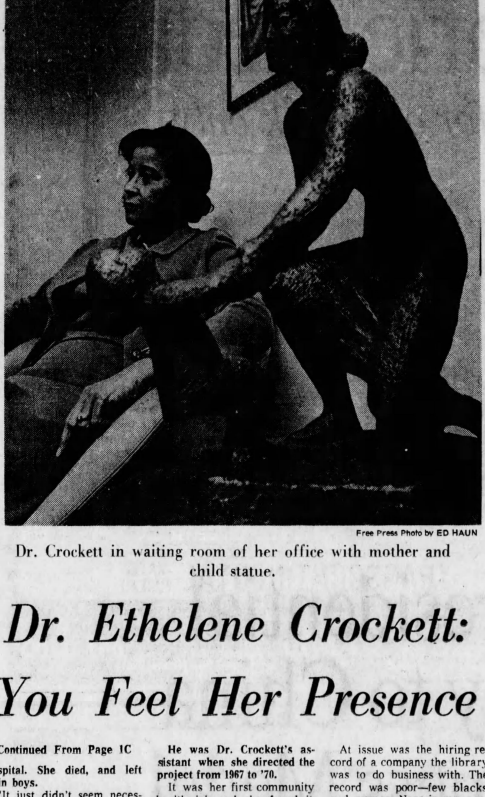

Free Press Photo by ED HAUN

Dr. Crockett in waiting room of her office with mother and child statue.

Dr. Ethelene Crockett: You Feel Her Presence

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hospital. She died, and left twin boys.

"It just didn't seem necessary for a woman to die in childbirth.

"I don't know how many lives I've saved . . . I've saved some, I hope," her voice trails off.

Saving lives. Staving off death—that's what Dr. Crockett does.

"SHE HAS A DEEP, thorough interest in people," says her husband, George. "She's concerned about them, and their human problems. She's not interested in making money, thank heavens, because I'm not, and she's not interested in keeping up with the Joneses—being seen someplace.

"It's people. And she sees the wide social aspects involved with them. Wherever people are and something's happening, you'll find one or the both of us there."

And Dr. Crockett seems to need people around her, engaged in conversation, laughter, discussion.

At 9:28 in the medical library, she's looking over references for a future talk on woman's role in health-fields.

And she's fluently speaking to another doctor in Spanish.

A LONG WAY from St. Joe, Mich., where she was born in 1914. Long way from Jackson, where she and her five brothers and sisters grew up.

She went to Jackson Junior College, then to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where she met George.

The first years of her marriage were spent having her own three babies and coaxing George along, young lawyer that he was. When George was along his way, Ethelene struck out to be a doctor—going to Howard University Medical College. That was 1942.

"I didn't even know I was accepted, when they called up to ask if I'd take a scholarship.

"And you know they said I couldn't go and get pregnant on them halfway through school if I had the scholarship. I knew I wouldn't." And she didn't, though she was quite ill in her last term, barely finishing with her class, though she finished ranking near the top.

In 1949 she served her internship at Detroit Receiving —"the fourth Negro in the history of the hospital," she says. But for her residency, she went to New York's Sydeham Hospital.

"I went there because no one would accept me in Detroit because I was black and I was a woman," she says bluntly.

Bluntly, ever so bluntly Dr. Crockett will tell you the truths of her life. It scares you, makes you feel ashamed, small, less than a person in her presence because she's been treated as less than a person. Even if you don't accept what she says, it may scare you.

MAYBE Dr. Ethelene Crockett scares a lot of people, frightening them off with her brusque manner, absolute directness.

"We argued much, and disagreed. (mainly on medical questions)" said Dr. Juan Dumasto, director of the Crittenton Detroit Maternal Infant Care project (DMIC). "Yet you always end up admiring her, at least for her consistency."

He was Dr. Crockett's assistant when she directed the project from 1967 to '70.

It was her first community health job and she found it frustrating.

IN 1952 she opened private practice as an obstetrician-gynecologist—the same year her husband was sent to prison for four months on a criminal contempt charge from a 1949 defense of one of a group of Communist leaders.

Speaking of his wife's reactions to his controversial positions Judge Crockett says, "Usually Ethelene will make some sort of joke about whatever I do. Like 'What have you been into now?'

"But I can count on her backing. And I know she will have some down to earth advice. Sometimes I'm so close to a situation I can't see another viewpoint. She can and will point it out to me—sort of a devil's advocate."

She talked about her DMIC-Crittenton experience as we drove to the Model Neighborhood Comprehensive Health Clinic at the old London Inn.

"I left private practice to run DMIC, but it wasn't working with the amount of money we had coming in . . . In '67 with higher costs we had the same funding level as in '66. You can't dejiver services to people and then cut down. How can you say to them there's not enough money to take care of you?

"I guess it's my weakness, but I can't handle that sort of thing emotionally. It got to the point where I hated to go in to work every day. So I quit."

Crittenton in general was experiencing many problems then, threatening to close. "Things are better now," said Dumasto.

AND IN 1970, after Crittenton, Dr. Crockett came to the Model Neighborhood clinic. (She was a member of the original citizens governing board that designed the clinic).

She evades talking about being director of the ob-gyn department. "I'm just around more than anyone else," she says. But she is eager for people to know about the clinic. Its philosophy is nearly identical to hers.

"A comprehensive health center takes into account more than just the medical problem," said Peter Vaughan, director of the clinic's social services. "It takes into account where the patient lives, what fears he has, what problems—non-medical maybe —which figure into his reactions to say going to a hospital.

Yet this isn't to say Dr. Crockett feels the clinic and patients have arrived. In fact its problems are subtly linked with her re-opening private gynecology practice. (Mornings in the clinic and afternoons in her own office).

BUT FOR THE next three hours medicine was forgotten. Dr. Crockett was chairing the meeting of the Detroit Public Library Commission.

Sensitive to everyone in the room, including those who hadn't been at a Commission meeting before, she would pause to explain the background of the pending business. But she was direct, nonsense in getting through the agenda.

And there was a conflict.

The lines in Dr. Crockett's face tightened, the cigarets moved faster between her lips and the ashtray. She was angry—restraining herself, though.

At issue was the hiring record of a company the library was to do business with. The record was poor—few blacks and women. None in management level positions. Yet the following day was deadline for an answer. The commissioner presenting the facts also said there was no alternative this day.

"Now this goes against my heart," Dr. Crockett said and the room was silent. "But we have to think of the library first."

Her pencil was ever taking notes, the other hand either cupping her chin or holding a cigaret—the meeting going smoothly, alternating between humorous recognitions of Commissioners and serious questions.

THE MEETING over, she was off to her office where young women, white and black, waited for her. An office covered with paintings of mothers and children—"It's sort of a natural theme, don't you think," says Dr. Crockett.

She denies that she has an excess of energy, but says she's got the time to be involved.

"You can't practice medicine, in a vacuum," she says. "Too many docetors get too narrow-minded.

And her children are raised now. George III is an attorney with Legal Aid and Defender's office; her daughter, Ethelene is a ob-gyn physician specializing in endicronology, another daughter, Elizabeth, is a Los Angeles school teacher. All married. There are seven grandchildren.

This is how Dr. Crockett explains her position:

"I'm concerned with health care—seeing that every mother gets adequate pre-natal care, that every mother gets adequate child care so that she can be gainfully employed.

"I just want to remove all the roadblocks in the way of making women a vital part of health services.

"There has been change in the community acceptance of balcks and women, and for the better," she continues citing that her daughter had a choice of residencies in '65, compared with her own restrictions in the early '50s.

"Though there have been changes, it's not good enough. But I hope what's happened is partly because some of us have forged ahead."

FORGED SHE has. Cut through much to success, acceptance.

And she's been forged by her experiences, she's been the medical expert in ob-gyn, the pioneer black, woman doctor in a specialty field.

"It's beautiful to see how she's mellowed," says Dr. Thomas Batchelor, director of the Model Neighborhood clinic, and an old friend. "She's a goddess, to me.

"She's an example of the great untapped wealth in this city. We are just now beginning to benefit from her great mind. And she's in decision-making positions in health now."

Dr. Crockett's a presence, not just a person. Commanding, down-to-earth, sharp of intellect and of tongue and temper, but gentle almost simple when she shows her grandchildren's picture, or notices someone's limp.

And she'll probably be laughing when she reads this.

She's the kind of person you want to memorize.