David Oshinsky Presents the Importance & History of Bellevue

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By: Amberly Lerner
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With no television until he was ten years old and teachers for parents, David Oshinsky had more than enough time to read and then read some more. Though there was a passion for reading and writing already within Oshinsky, it did help that his hometown was New York City, a place filled to the brim with stories to be unveiled and told.

Previous histories that Oshinsky has told include those of Senator Joseph McCarthy, former Rutgers University Professor Lienhard Bergel, and the Parchman State Penitentiary. His book, *Polio: An American Story*, chronicles the polio epidemic, stemmed from his own experience as a one of the two million kids in the experiment for the eventual vaccine. For telling this story, Oshinsky won the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for history.

Bellevue Hospital is another of those stories. It is thought to be a common figure in American culture, seen frequently in *The Godfather* saga, *Blue Bloods*, and *Law & Order*. Oshinsky’s mother would tell him sometimes, “‘Keep it up and you’re going to Bellevue.’”

But that is only one of Bellevue Hospital’s many facets. Established in the 1700s, Bellevue has stood throughout much of the history of New York City. Many medical advancements, such as blood transfusions and morgues, were made in Bellevue. The first ambulance, driven by Irish immigrants, was also created by Bellevue.

Most notably, as a public hospital, Bellevue keeps its doors open to anyone — whether that be an immigrant, a Jew, a young man dying of AIDS, or even a president (Bellevue and its doctors have treated four: Ulysses S. Grant, James A. Garfield, Grover Cleveland, and Abraham Lincoln). Nobody is turned away, and frequently, this means that other private hospitals in New York City give Bellevue the patients they rather not have.

In our country’s current political climate, where the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid are under attack, Bellevue Hospital is both sobering and important to remember. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said it himself: “Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane.” Bellevue is not just an interesting change of setting in *Law & Order*; it is one of the few champions of the important notion that healthcare is an undeniable right, not a privilege, and it is important that we celebrate its story.

Oshinsky’s book, *Bellevue: Three Centuries of Medicine and Mayhem at America’s Most Storied Hospital* is one such celebration. “There was so many interesting wild and competing stories,” Oshinsky remarked on Bellvue’s rich history. In writing such a chronicle, he added, “You get out of the way and let the story tell itself.”

Even so, he would have had a much harder time to piece the stories together without the help of his education. A graduate of Cornell, Oshinsky feels that college, in particular, was instrumental.

“I had some terrific professors. They guided me and, in some ways, turned my life around. I’m everlastingly thankful to them. As a college student, having a mentor, especially one who really cares about your future and your potential, is really critical. I was very fortunate.”

*Bellevue: Three Centuries of Medicine and Mayhem at America’s Most Storied Hospital* published by Anchor Books (2017), is available online and in most bookstores.

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