Carol Burnett, Class of '60, arrived at Einstein in the fall of 1956. She was one of only four women, and the only person of color, in her class of 94 students. Einstein had accepted its first black student, a young man, to the Class of '59, but he withdrew from the school voluntarily. Carol thus became the first black to graduate from AECOM. The times were very different in 1956 and Carol laughs when she says, “It was like a different century,” only to realize that it was indeed a different century. At the time, she wouldn’t have been called black, but Negro, and women—especially black women—did not have the opportunities available to them today.

Carol is one of two daughters of British West Indian immigrant parents. Above all, her parents valued a strong education for their daughters, so they moved frequently seeking New York neighborhoods with the best public schools. Her journey took her from Manhattan to the south Bronx, which at the time was an area of poor but hard-working immigrants. Carol excelled in school, calling herself a bookworm, and the library became her second home. She ultimately gained acceptance to the prominent all-girls Hunter High School in Manhattan, allowing her to bypass her neighborhood vocational high school. While she had been in classes with a few white children prior to high school, Carol suddenly found herself in the minority at Hunter, as one of only four black students in a class of 30. Yet she never felt discriminated against.

From Hunter High School, Carol went on to Hunter College, a prestigious New York City college that was tuition free and therefore the only higher education oppor-
tunity her family could afford. Scholarships to privately endowed universities were simply not available to minority applicants.

It was at Hunter that Carol was able to cultivate her love for science. She enrolled in the intensive “Pre-Chemist” program with the dream of one day becoming a scientist. Her inspiration came as a pre-teen when she fell in love with a book by Paul de Kruif entitled *Microbe Hunters* that explored the lives and work of scientists such as Marie and Pierre Curie and Louis Pasteur. Her paternal uncle, a physician, also served as an inspiration and driving force in her life.

During her junior year at Hunter, Carol took a class with her first female professor, Dr. Wertenbacher, a white woman of German Jewish ancestry. Meeting a woman who was a full professor of chemistry changed Carol’s life. For the first time, she saw that a woman could have a successful career in science. Toward the end of the academic year, Dr. Wertenbacher took Carol aside and asked about her plans after college. Carol remained quiet until Dr. Wertenbacher suggested a career in medicine. For Carol it was like bells going off in her head. Finally someone had given voice to a dream that had been lurking in the back of her mind, struggling to come to the surface. Yes, like her uncle, she really did want to be a physician.

Dr. Wertenbacher suggested that Carol consider the traditionally black medical schools in the south or Women’s Medical College in Philadelphia. But Carol had heard many terrible stories about racism in the south and had no desire to experience it firsthand. And while she was academically advanced, Carol freely admits that she felt socially immature having received a relatively sheltered upbringing by her parents. In the end, she decided she did not want to leave New York and preferred going to a medical school nearby so that she could continue living at home. So, Dr. Wertenbacher advised Carol to apply to every school in New York City and even offered to pay the application fees if Carol’s family couldn’t. Looking back, Carol feels that perhaps one reason she feels such a strong affinity to Jewish people is because of her encounters with Dr. Wertenbacher, a woman who provided her with such overwhelming generosity and support and who, Carol explains, “all but adopted” her.

Carol was accepted at both Downstate and AECOM but for her, AECOM seemed the only choice. She remembers feeling somewhat uncomfortable during her Downstate interview. But at Einstein, she interviewed with two giants in their fields—Drs. Lewis Fraad, professor of pediatrics and a member of the medical school’s founding faculty, and Gertie Marx, professor of anesthesiology (obstetrics). Dr. Fraad, Carol recalls, was clearly an “old-time radical,” and at the time, she adds, “there was no better friend for an African-American than an old-time radical.” And as for Dr. Marx, Carol remembers her excitement thinking, “wow, a woman doctor—what an inspiration!” Despite the misgivings of the Hunter
College dean who felt Einstein was an unproven institution whereas Downstate had a fine track record in training physicians, Carol went with her gut. Einstein would welcome her, was committed to its students—and, best of all, was only a short bus ride from her parents’ new home at the corner of Gun Hill and Boston Roads.

Einstein proved to be the right choice. Although she was offered a tuition waiver (a full scholarship) Carol turned it down, citing an upbringing filled with a tradition of accepting responsibility and paying debts. Now looking back she uses a favorite (and not-too-nice) Yiddish word to explain her decision: “I was a sch...k!” She did manage a high-paying and happily not hard-working job tending Dr. Ernst Scharrer’s toads but disappointed him by not taking a similar liking to Dr. Berta Scharrer’s (his wife) cockroaches. (Ernst Scharrer was founding chair of anatomy and structural biology at Einstein and his wife, Berta, was a professor in that department, a prominent woman of science and role model to generations of Einstein students.)

The atmosphere at AECOM provided a place where Carol could thrive. “It was fascinating, a very new place constantly planning new directions in education. It was so new,” she remembers, “that the bursar’s office was in a trailer.” The feeling that the administration and faculty were starting something innovative permeated all aspects of life at AECOM, and the faculty appreciated the students for choosing Einstein over other, more established medical schools. “We didn’t make the safe choices and instead chose Einstein. The faculty knew this and worked hard to give us the best education possible,” she says.

Carol’s transition was made easier because of AECOM’s practice of placing students into small laboratory groups of eight. The labs were open all night and Carol found them a safe place to study away from her doting parents. “When you have an anatomy final and you’re cramming, Carol says, “the last thing you want to hear is your mother yelling, “get to bed or you’ll make yourself sick!” Her lab group, although formed alphabetically, was quite diverse by AECOM standards. Three of the four women in her class were also in her section as well as two Christian students (of which there were a handful). “In those days Einstein didn’t get more diverse than that,” she recounts with a laugh.

Carol’s lab-mates quickly began her “Jewish” cultural immersion, buying her Leo Rosten’s book, The Joys of Yiddish, soon after school began. Carol remembers being at a party and involved in a heated discussion with other classmates about the “Jewish larynx” that was imbued with the ability to pronounce the guttural and distinctly Hebrew “ch” sound. Carol cleared her throat and yelled out an impressive “Chhhhanukah” to her cheering friends.

Perhaps it was the fact that Einstein was founded as a place where Jews who were not welcome at other medical schools
found safe haven that sensitivity and respect for other minorities permeated the institution, resulting in racism on campus being quite rare. Her medical school memories are overwhelmingly positive—not once did a patient refuse her care nor did an attending or house officer make her feel unwelcome, but Carol does remember one incident that was particularly hurtful. A white male classmate thought he was giving friendly advice when he told her that, although her fellow students accepted her now, it would be very different once they graduated. “It isn’t natural,” he said. “The people you think are your friends won’t be when you leave.” These words hurt far worse than anything she had heard before, because they came from someone she had considered a friend.

Fortunately, her classmate was wrong. Carol graduated with what she laughingly recalls as a double major in medicine and Judaic studies. She felt ready to leave the safety of the Bronx and chose Mt. Zion Hospital in San Francisco for her rotating internship. Mt. Zion, she felt, was also a Jewish institution and founded on a similar philosophy to Einstein. In a dead-on imitation of a Jewish accent Carol said, “When you find something good, you stay by it.” From Mt. Zion, Carol went to Los Angeles Children’s Hospital for a pediatrics residency, which, she says, turned out to be a big mistake. Because of her race, she was resented by hospital staff as well as patients. After a year, she felt she had to leave. Dr. Fraad came to her rescue, and she returned to the Bronx and Einstein to complete her training at the medical school’s then-affiliated Lincoln Hospital. Carol’s career has taken her all over New York City, most notably to Mount Sinai School of Medicine, where she served as Assistant Dean for Admissions and Student Affairs. She has been a persistent force in helping to diversify the medical school’s student body. Although she has since retired from clinical practice, Carol is still very active on the admissions committee.

Looking back at her years at Einstein, Carol says: “I obtained an education second to none, met strong female role models and experienced a feeling of unwavering acceptance and respect from my peers—not to mention a fine Yiddish vocabulary.” Carol would love to hear from former classmates and can be reached through the Mount Sinai Medical School Admissions Office at (212) 241-6696.