



More Than Just an Old Brick

BY KATHLEEN RUCCIONE,
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TO ANYONE ELSE, IT'S JUST AN old used brick sitting on my bookshelf. But when I look at it or touch its rough and uneven surface, I can see an old hospital building where I first took care of pediatric patients as a student nurse. I see the highly polished dark floors, the racks full of metal charts, the rubella ward and the heavy glass bottles of IV fluids.

And the children: the sweet little girl with cystic fibrosis, the red-haired boy with hemophilia, the baby with multiple-stage repair for exstrophy of the bladder, another baby precariously awaiting open-heart surgery, and the one with failure to thrive who stole my heart.

I see the offices and labs that replaced the wards by the time I came back to Childrens Hospital Los Angeles to work as a hematology/oncology nurse. Like several of my colleagues who also remembered other times and other lives in the old hospital, I saved a brick when the building was demolished after the Whittier earthquake in 1987. For me, there's magic in that brick.

Preserve & Protect

The magic also is in my collection of hand-tinted postcards depicting Southern California hospitals early in the 20th century. Magic is in the nurse's cape my friend and mentor bequeathed to me. It's also in being able to preserve and honor the history of the nursing profession. However, this kind of magic is in danger of disappearing without a concerted effort to find or acquire, archive and preserve the culture and heritage of nursing, particularly in the western U.S.

In contrast to the well-established conservation of nursing history in the East, there has been no similar effort to document the events and movements that have occurred in — or affected — nursing in the West. Fortunately, that is about to change with the founding of the Western Conservancy of Nursing History (WCNH).

Humble Beginnings

The WCNH literally began in a hospital's dank basement with some dusty cartons des-

tinued for the dumpster. Phyllis Esslinger, MSN, RN, professor emeritus at Azusa Pacific University (APU) School of Nursing, tells of hearing that all the records of the Huntington Hospital School of Nursing, Pasadena, were being cleared out (and, in fact, that some materials already had been disposed of).

Retrieving and safely storing the boxes, she began to think that a similar fate probably awaited other now-closed hospital diploma schools in the region whose records were deteriorating or being discarded. She thought of the nurses who were aging and ailing, and whose stories would be left untold for future generations of nurses unless there was a way to collect nursing artifacts and documents, and to organize, interpret and display them. Her dream was to make these collections available as a resource to the community for research and other scholarly pursuits as well as a medium through which to communicate to the greater community the pride and honor of a noble and caring profession.¹

Over a 3-year period, Esslinger led a team of like-minded nurses and others to establish the WCNH in collaboration with the Iota Chapter of Sigma Theta Tau International. It is housed in the School of Nursing on the APU campus.

Dedication Remembered

Now officially approved as a nonprofit organization, the WCNH has begun receiving donations of funding support and nursing artifacts. One of the first contributions to the collection came from Pamela Cone, PhD, RN, assistant professor of nursing at APU. Cone donated materials from her aunt, Edwina Todd, a Navy nurse from Pomona who was one of about 80 nurses trapped as prisoners of war in the Philippines during World War II.

Todd and her nursing colleagues dealt with horrific wounds, disease, starvation, bombing raids and overwhelming daily struggles, compellingly described in *We Band of Angels*² and in *All This Hell: U.S. Army Nurses Imprisoned by the Japanese*.³ Yet, under the leadership of

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Maude Davidson, the senior Army nurse, all of the nurses survived their ordeal.

They were courageous, independent and resourceful. Todd was quoted as saying that early in the Japanese occupation, the nurses were ordered to take inventory of the medical supplies and to save their most valued medicines. "We covered this loss by breaking one of the cardinal rules of pharmacy: mislabeling drugs. Most of our quinine was labeled soda bicarbonate."³

Todd's Navy nursing cap, uniform, photos, correspondence, scrapbooks and citations of honor document a harrowing nursing story that will not be forgotten; it will be honored by its place in the WCNH archives.

Future Foundation

At the first WCNH board meeting I attended, casual conversation about interesting old hospital buildings in Los Angeles led one of the members to confide that the remarkable building she had worked in was long gone, but she had saved a brick from it. Another member, looking happily surprised, said she, too, had saved a brick from the now-demolished hospital where she went to nursing school.

At that moment, I knew I was in the right place at the right time and I told them about my own brick. We shared more than our reverence for the narrative magic of the stories contained in our bricks. We shared Phyllis Esslinger's dream of preserving and celebrating Western nursing history.

We hope our three special bricks are the symbolic cornerstone for a growing collection of nursing documents and artifacts, and that — with the help and support of others who value nurses and nursing — we can achieve our ultimate dream for the WCNH, which is to house the archive and museum in a building named to honor a special benefactor. For me, the WCNH isn't just about looking back in time. It's about looking forward to the nurses of the future.

For more information about the WCNH, helping to support its goals or to inquire about donating artifacts or documents, contact Phyllis Esslinger at pesslinger@apu.edu. ■

References for this article can be accessed at www.advancweb.com/nurses. Click on References on the left navigation bar under Education.

Kathleen Ruccione is nursing administrator in the Childrens Center for Cancer and Blood Diseases at Childrens Hospital Los Angeles. of the nurses survived their ordeal.