

Life excerpts of a Legendary Nurse Extraordinaire

Mrs. Amy V. Cockcroft

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I was one of eight children. We went to school in New York around or near Cornell University. We walked to school every morning. Today, I'm amazed at the bus system. In the winter, we would take a sled to go down the hills. It was very cold and I remembered walking to the school with the snow on both sides of the ditches. There was a little red schoolhouse just about a half mile from our house. We went there until the 6th grade and then we went to a school located downtown where I also graduated. After high school I knew I wanted to go to nursing school. (I had always wanted to be a nurse). My mom didn't react to my decision but my father did. He was so afraid I'd have to take care of men. So I stayed home for four years. He had a restaurant that served a lot of older people. It was a pretty little place with white tablecloths and flowers. We had a chef who wore a white hat and I loved him actually. So they got me into making pies for the restaurant and our customers could order any kind of pies such as apple, cherry, etc. We sold the pies for 10¢ a slice. I would also have to wait tables.

At the end of the year, dad relented, because a friend of mine was going off to school, he thought that it might be ok for me. So he drove me about 90 miles away to Rochester. It was a big city compared to the little town I was from. Once we arrived Ms. Morris, the director of nursing from Presbyterian Hospital in New York, entered the room for our student and family meeting. She was tall and stately which I still remember so well even though it was a long time ago. She was charming and dad kind of fell for her. She took us on a tour around the campus. So, at last I started nursing school. It was a 3-year nursing school at that time. There were only three-degree schools in the country when I started school. This was a very good nursing school. We worked long hours and I remembered getting sleepy at night and the Supervisor would come along and she would say, "wash your face and hands. " Then we'd line up one by one. The nurses would use a flashlight to go around and see the patients at night instead of yelling the way some nurses do now. I remembered when I graduated, the whole family came up. Eastman Kodak was very an important company in our community therefore we had our graduation ceremony

in their Community Center. The company gave a bouquet of roses to each graduate. The last 9 months of school several things happened that directed my career. As a senior, I was made a head nurse in charge of the Private Duty Ward complete with all private rooms. The thing I remembered most was there were so many tuberculosis patients and the surgery they did on those patients was just appalling to me. They would take out a whole rib and the patients would sleep at night on the floor or court area with a full line of blankets on. The idea was that the cold weather was supposed to help them in their recovery from TB. I remembered a sweet girl, 16 years old, had her ribs removed but unfortunately she died. That situation was very traumatic for me. I knew that having that responsibility would be extremely difficult for me but I was able to accept it.

Prior to graduating, the director of the Pediatric Ward left or was asked to leave and I was asked to be the head of the Pediatric Department. As I look back on that period, I felt that I didn't know about being head of anything, but I did what I could. I remember teaching pediatrics on my hands and knees, mind you, and I worked harder than the students so that I could keep ahead of them. I was there for approximately 5 years.

Ms. Briggs, who was then our superintendent, encouraged me to go to Columbia University to get my Bachelors'. She informed me that she would pay for school if I would enroll. So I went to Columbia University and got my degree. When I finished, I had to have a job and I worked at Syracuse for 2 or 3 years in Pediatrics and that was quite an experience – a 3-year school with in a college. We had a very nice person as Director of Nurses. She always wanted all the beds made before the doctors made rounds so the place would look nice. I told her that the children came first. They needed their baths and to get settled, then we'd make the beds.

A time came when I went back to Columbia University to finish my degree. I had an interview with a nice man at the University. The young lady who taught Nurse Practices at Columbia University wrote in my final interview that I was too juvenile in dress. What I was wearing was a skirt and sweater, which was very, very nice, and that really upset me. So when I had my interview with the Head of the school, he mentioned that incident and said that he would remove that statement because he felt it was ridiculous. I've found many times in my life when you hire and fire people; you have to be kind and honest with integrity. He received a phone call from

Vanderbilt and they requested someone to teach pediatrics. I was recommended for the position and went for the interview.

It was the first time I ever flew on an airplane and also was my first time out of New York. They had a large, very nice and well-decorated apartment for me. I could look out the window of the apartment and watch a lady picking very lovely magnolias. She became one of my mentors for life. I had only three in my lifetime and she definitely was a great one. We instantly were impressed with each other. I was the only non-southerner and that was my first trip to the south. Things were extremely different in the south. I received \$5.00 more per month in pay because I was from so far away. At Christmas time and holidays, I would return home on the train.

As time progressed a friend of mine, Marie Farrow, became the operating room supervisor so that's why I stayed at Vanderbilt so long. She ended up working on her doctorate at Columbia University. It was a very hard and extremely difficult program.

When the war began, I was still at Vanderbilt. I received a letter from Marie asking me to represent Vanderbilt University in recruiting nurses. So I was given the task of going throughout the South and all of its colleges, like Mary Baldwin, all through Virginia and surrounding areas. The recruiting experiences were kind of fun traveling and meeting different people. I was not only recruiting for nurses but for the entire University.

Marie invited me to Virginia for dinner and it was very enjoyable. Not too long afterwards, the Chancellor received a letter from the President of the college asking for my release so that I could go forth with teaching. On the entire University campus I was the first faculty member to leave Vanderbilt during war times and enlist into the Service.

When the war started we were in Julia Harris' apartment. She was one of our faculty members who was born in Japan, but her family was from Chicago. She was cooking us a sukiyaki dinner which none of us ever had before. As we were waiting for dinner news report came over the radio informing us about Pearl Harbor. Everybody in the home was stunned and I don't remember eating any of the food, even today the memory remains so vivid.

I ended up going home. I talked with my family and they thought it would be a great idea that I enlist. I went in as a non-commissioned officer. We all received training and I remembered Dr. Parron, who was Head of U.S. Health Services, came in and said that we would be going out in the field and to remember that they were

behind us. They also informed us that they would have our records and files and if we should get into any trouble or have any questions we could always call them. Those statements were very comforting to me regarding my decision to enlist. Anyway, I started examining every school in New England and that was my style to take a deeper look into everything. I was there for seven years and was promoted up to Commander.

After that, the service loaned me to the Department of Education in Washington for a year. I was trying to promote standard and/or uniform practices of nursing education throughout every state. I spent a year traveling around the country (from New York to Washington State to Albuquerque, New Mexico). There were good and bad things about traveling. I loved Albuquerque, and would love to go back there to visit. I participated in a program to determine what the costs would be to open and operate a School of Nursing. We worked out a formula. I spent three years in Kansas City working with engineers, doctors and public health employees. We would go into established hospitals in different communities that needed nursing schools. My job was to see that those hospitals had the equipment and necessary prerequisites for nursing and the placement of other items necessary for having a successful program. That was very interesting job. Before my time was up, a young lady named Ms. Cole and some of the other leading nurses in South Carolina wanted so much to have a good nursing school so I was recruited and asked to come down.

The Governor gave me some help in to assist me with getting around town, etc. I talked to Heads of Departments, visited hospitals and schools to see what they might have to offer. There was one hospital in the area I had to struggle with in order to get any ideas on the table and that was mainly because there was a man there who didn't believe in education for nurses. I then I visited a hospital in Charleston and the University of South Carolina. When I wrote my report I recommended that a school be located in Charleston.

When I came down to review the areas there was a new program in place where the students studied at the University of South Carolina for two years and then were sent to a hospital in Charleston. The University provided them with a degree but there was no clear plan for the entire three years. The students could not tell how much credit they received. I felt the goal should be to produce strong graduates who were pretty savvy. Before I left, I wrote in my report that if the University of South Carolina wanted a school of nursing, they could have one if they met the

requirements. So I wrote down all of the requirements. When I returned home Dr. Russell from the University of South Carolina was trying to recruit me to come to Columbia and eventually I did. So I came that same year. We needed a year to get ready, including getting the faculty and the curriculum together. Charleston never approved of me anymore; they wouldn't even talk to me. When I went to Charleston to pay my respects after I came to South Carolina, the headman there got up from the table and said, "We didn't invite you here." Anyway, I did come to the University and the men on the campus were wonderful including the Deans and Heads of Departments. When we received the yellow uniforms for the nursing students, everybody went wild and loved the uniforms. I did write the report and it is in the library at the corner of Sumter and Pendleton Streets.

So you asked me if I could change anything in my life what would it be? Well I would say, I would truly marry earlier in life and have some children. I do have my husband.

Mrs. Amy V. Cockcroft, if you were writing the ending chapters to a great nursing novel, what words of wisdom would you want every nurse to gain after reading this masterpiece?

Well, if I could, I would say to my fellow nurses, "Remember who we are." Nursing is a profession; treasure it and maintain that caring spirit. We must recognize who we are. We may not all wear the white caps or the white uniform today but each of us must be able to know who we are as nurses. We must be able to distinguish nurses among the crowds. Nurses must have a voice and understand that they must play an important role in our communities, legislation, the financial arenas and in our work place. We must always be the best nurses individually and collectively. Continue to develop strong nursing leaders that are not afraid to make a difference. Know why, you became a nurse. Always make time to have fun and enjoy life. It is no longer up to me but I leave those few words of advice with you, this generation and generations to come.

And, "SO THAT IS MY LIFE."

Mrs. Amy V. Cockcroft

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