

PROFILE OF A LEADER

M. J. Wilson:

Innovative Nurse Educator:

“Bath Tub Teacher”

Mansell, D.

M. Jean Wilson was viewed by her colleagues as a woman who influenced and advanced university nursing education and created unique strategies to develop nursing programs at the University of Toronto. Her career in Toronto spanned 39 years and encompassed every aspect of the evolving nursing education program at the university. On April 11, 1974, her students organized her retirement party because they “felt a great need to honour one of the most admired and skillful teachers of the faculty.” The following biography traces Miss Wilson’s career from Saskatchewan to Toronto where she worked under the tutelage of Miss Kathleen Russell and developed her teaching skills. Wilson always attributed her success to the mentoring she received from Russell. It was as teacher, colleague and friend that M. Jean Wilson assisted Kathleen Russell in her goal to win the support of the nursing community, the academic community and the community-at-large for her integrated and independent model of nursing education.

“I think that I maybe I was very interested in students, and I certainly recognized the fact that I enjoyed teaching very much. I guess that I was willing and able to work for long hours at things. Probably not wise enough to recognize that some assignments were not within my qualifications but if you have nobody else, it’s the same old story, you keep filling in the holes...Maybe a fair amount of patience for that...I was just going ahead and doing the work that I felt should be done with the students on behalf of the school...I was quite willing to give other people the credit for developing things and so on...I always attempted to let people do their best and I had no desire to hold anybody back to try to fulfil my own desires.”

M. Jean Wilson

M. Jean Wilson died in Calgary in December, 2000. Prior to her death, Jean expressed one regret and that was that she had not taken time to write a book in order to leave something of permanence behind (Kirkwood, 1983). Her legacy in clinical teaching however, continues through her students who remain loyal, devoted, and committed to the ideals fostered by their friendship with ‘Miss Wilson’. Jean’s efforts were not wasted.

Margaret Jean Wilson was born of Scottish-Presbyterian parents (William and Margaret) on December 9, 1908 in Regina, Saskatchewan. The Margaret was shortened to ‘M.’ in later school years due to the prevalence of the name, Margaret Jean Wilson. Jean’s birth was followed by that of a brother and sister. Her father, William Wilson, was a carpenter and respected for his skill and work ethic. The family attended church regularly and participated in community affairs. Although intellectual pursuits were not often discussed around the dinner table, the children were expected to maintain a reasonable standard at school. For example, on one occasion Jean’s Latin marks were falling and her teacher expressed considerable concern about the situation to Jean’s mother. Mrs. Wilson then insisted that Jean spend an extra hour every day studying to ensure that her marks improved. This extra hour was to be done under her supervision. Jean found this to be very amusing in view of the fact that Mrs. Wilson had absolutely no knowledge of Latin.

On completion of grade twelve, Jean told her father that she would like to become a nurse. This was not at all what William Wilson wanted for his daughter because to him, “nurses were maids” and he refused to allow her to pursue this career aspiration (Mansell, 1988). Rather, Jean was sent to the University of Saskatchewan in 1927 and enrolled in an Arts and Science Baccalaureate program with her major in Home Economics and her minor in English. Although she was sent to university and away from nursing at the time, Jean’s dedicated efforts in her nursing career were clearly an attempt to change the popular image of nursing that was held by her father.

In spite of the fact that university education was a privilege during the twenties, she remembers there were a “goodly number of women” on the campus. Although she insists that she continued to be an average student, her desire to be her own person emerged once she was away from home. In those days the male students held a ‘Pyjama Parade’ each year and the men dressed in pyjamas and paraded through Saskatoon. Women were not allowed to participate in this event. Jean Wilson and two female friends however, managed to acquire three pairs of men’s pyjamas and joined the parade. Although they did not say a word, a male friend eventually recognized them and quickly hustled them back to the Women’s Residence. The Dean of Women did hear rumours regarding the fact that some female

students, dressed in men's pyjamas, had joined the parade but luckily was unable to identify them. If they had been discovered, they would have been dismissed from the university, not something with which the Scottish William Wilson would have been pleased. Jean Wilson recounted this anecdote with considerable glee (Mansell, 1994). Clearly, for a female to have been willing to follow through on this type of activity in the late twenties reflects independence of character, determination, and some commitment to liberation.

Following graduation, she enjoyed a holiday in Europe and then informed her father of her enduring desire to enter nursing. Although she did not describe nursing in terms of a "calling", Jean recalled that her deliberations did involve a certain amount of missionary zeal (Mansell, 1988). William Wilson, convinced by his daughter's determination and satisfied that she had a university degree, agreed. Margaret Wilson made her uniforms and Jean headed off in 1931, to the Toronto General Hospital School of Nursing, considered to be one of the best in Canada. The program involved an apprenticeship training, the norm for nursing preparation at the time.

Early in her training, Jean became frustrated with the way she was treated and the menial tasks that were assigned to her on a repetitive basis. As an older student with a post-secondary education, Jean was dumbfounded when she was punished for missing the bus and returning to the residence late one night following a concert. This authoritarian attitude greeted her at the bedside. She recalled:

The Head Nurse had asked me to clean some patient's fingernails, so I pulled a chair up beside his bed and I got a basin of water and soaked his hands. I really thought I was doing a good job! Well, when she saw me seated to clean his fingernails, there was one yell went out of her! I practically leaped out of the chair! "Miss Wilson, what do you think you're doing?" So I got up and went to her and I said, I thought you asked me to clean his fingernails. "Now what are you doing seated?" Well, I imagine my face was a revelation...So then I just said well I'm sorry, I had come from a place where I had marks taken off me if I didn't know how to utilize my energies (Kirkwood, 1983).

Although economy of effort was definitely a necessary part of nursing, Jean had difficulty relating the need to clean thousands of bedspring coils with a small wire brush to the delivery of nursing care. Her letter home gave an account of this situation as justifiable reason to withdraw from the program, but; "That man who would not let me enter nursing wrote back - It never occurred to him that a daughter of his would quit...[once] she had taken on a job" (Mansell, 1988). Properly chastised, Jean settled into her training and graduated in 1934. In their final year the

students could choose between spending time in psychiatry or in public health but Jean insisted on doing both, further demonstration of her drive to acquire breadth in her nursing education.

During the first six months following graduation, Jean was engaged in private duty and then general duty nursing both in the community and at the Toronto General Hospital. Jean Gunn, Director of Nursing at the Toronto General Hospital, then employed her as an Assistant Head Nurse on a Medical Floor. When she was promoted to Head Nurse on a Surgical Floor, her monthly salary was increased from \$75.00 to \$75.50 (Mansell, 1988). Nurses were expected

to be deferential and obedient and Jean Wilson was not in entire agreement with that philosophy. One physician encountered this when he arrived on her surgical ward. Jean was busy elsewhere but he expected her to attend to his needs immediately so he yelled for her. She responded with the following;



"Where I come from I was taught that you only whistle for dogs!" (Mansell, 1994).

The University of Toronto School of Nursing's thirty-nine month diploma program was well-established by 1935 and their students were acquiring their clinical experience at the Toronto General Hospital. Jean Wilson was approached to supervise their students on the night shift. Jean accepted the part-time position and found the experience to be rewarding and educational. She then had an opportunity to join the Victorian Order of Nurses in Vancouver where her current boyfriend intended to set up his medical practice. She followed him to Vancouver but while there, she received a telegram from Edith Kathleen Russell (Director of the School) asking her not to make any career decisions until Jean had met with her. Jean then returned to Toronto and was hired by Russell as "Residence Nurse" in the School of Nursing thus beginning her lengthy career at the University of Toronto.

Looking back on this decision, she never regretted it because she believed that she would not have made a good wife anyway and feels that "what little bit of women's lib" she had was in terms of her career. Indeed, for Wilson,

“it was the only courageous move I ever made”. Furthermore, Jean feels that once employed by Russell, she became a student in the truest sense of the word (Mansell, 1994). It was during the next fifteen years, 1937 to 1952, that M. Jean Wilson played her invaluable and fundamentally important role to the success attained by Kathleen Russell in changing nursing education in general and in the success of the Basic Program in Nursing at the University of Toronto, in particular.

Jean Wilson was one of a group of women associated with the School of Nursing from 1935 to 1952. She represented one continuous strand devoted to the maintenance of the school’s fabric. Wilson often used the metaphor of the school as a patchwork quilt because for her, the school was “a solid piece of material - well-woven and tough” (Mansell, 1998). Although many staff arrived and departed, Jean Wilson’s presence was continuous in the Basic Program from 1935 to 1952, when Russell retired. During the war years, she worked round-the-clock and in 1941 and 1942, she was the only full-time staff member in the Basic Program (University of Toronto Staff Report, n.d.). According to one colleague, it was Wilson’s commitment and devotion to duty that ensured the ongoing success of the Basic Program at the school of nursing (Telephone conversation with Jeanette Watson, September 1994). It was in this environment that Jean Wilson admitted to becoming a real student and she credits Kathleen Russell with all of the learning she acquired.

In 1939, the outbreak of World War Two brought considerable disruption to activities at the University of Toronto School of Nursing. Many nurses left for overseas service. Russell asked Jean Wilson to stay and teach at the School because nurses were in short-supply. Jean agreed to stay behind and given the shortage of instructors, was presented with an opportunity to fine-tune her teaching skills and begin to develop her concept of integrating classroom and clinical teaching in nursing education. This involved what she described as “bathtub teaching”. This phrase was used because:

Sometimes the classes were held with the students sitting on the edge of the bathtub, in other words, in the bathroom,...there were no designated places. To me it [the teaching] lost its significance if you walked a couple of blocks away [from] the hospital to a classroom. So we struggled along in that way (Kirkwood, 1983).

This was done to eliminate any artificial barriers that had been created between the classroom and the bedside.

As a teacher at the School of Nursing, Jean Wilson was responsible for first the Diploma Program and then the Basic Baccalaureate Program when it was introduced in 1942. This program began as a four year program and was

extended to five years in 1946 in order to expand upon the liberal arts component. This Basic Program was the focus of much of Russell’s attention and Jean Wilson’s energy because she not only taught most of the nursing subjects but, at the same time, was working on a degree in Pedagogy which she received in 1946. In spite of their combined efforts enrolment was low. During the early years of the program there were only fifteen to twenty students enrolled but by the end of the decade the number was up to seventy (James, 1949). Although Jean Wilson worked alone in the beginning, additional staff was hired as the student population increased (University of Toronto Staff Report, n.d.).

In spite of the heavy teaching responsibilities, long days, and the need to stay up half the night in order to keep ahead of the students, Jean Wilson continued to perfect her clinical teaching. This model for nursing education received international attention when the International Council of Nurses asked Jean to present a paper on her teaching.

The important feature of this model of integrated nursing education was the mobility of the student and the instructor, a mobility that allowed both to move from the educational setting to the clinical setting without noting a change in scene (Russell & Wilson, 1949). Interest in this model of nursing education grew as requests arrived at the University of Toronto School of Nursing for Jean Wilson to visit other schools of nursing across Canada to present workshops on her Clinical Teaching. (e.g., from Halifax Infirmary, June 23, 1950, University of Toronto Archives, A73-053-004).

This new approach to nursing education however, was not readily accepted by the local Toronto hospitals that were expected to provide the clinical experience for the University of Toronto nursing students. Hospital administrators were unanimous in their belief that the hospital existed to provide patient care, not educate nurses. Furthermore, the nursing service expected from the nursing students meant that fewer graduate nurses were required on each ward to care for the patients. Economics aside, there was always a struggle between the hospital and the University nursing school over the control of the student’s time while in the hospital.

Jean Wilson’s willingness to confront difficulties encountered was absolutely fundamental to the eventual smoothing of the troubled waters. Indeed, one colleague stated that “she put out the fires at the Toronto General Hospital” for Kathleen Russell (Interview with Dorothy Nelson, August, 1988). Jean Wilson credits any success she might have had to the fact that she was a graduate of the Toronto General Hospital.

Jean Wilson was appointed Associate Professor in 1961 and was granted tenure in 1967. She stayed on teaching in the Basic Program until her retirement in 1974. She continued to be very involved in committee work within

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the School of Nursing and within the broader university community such as the University President's Committee and the Senate. Her professional work was at both the provincial and national level, particularly in the area of nursing education. In 1967, as a consultant for the World Health Organization, she travelled to India to assist in a nursing education project. As a recipient of a Rockefeller Travel Grant she travelled throughout the United States. These years were busy years for Jean Wilson and after almost forty years at the School, she was recognized for her innovative work in university nursing education and the high quality leadership she had demonstrated while at the University of Toronto. Jean Wilson's importance to the University of Toronto was further underlined in 1977 when she was honoured with a "Long Service Award" and four months later was appointed Professor Emeritus.

Not surprisingly, given her own appreciation of what she had learned from her experience at the School of Nursing, Jean Wilson donated \$30,000 to the School at which

point the Faculty decided to establish an M. Jean Wilson Scholarship. The award was first presented in 1987 and was based solely on academic standing, a criteria that points to the importance that academics held for the donor.

Following her retirement in Calgary, Alberta, Jean Wilson's students continued to regard her with respect and affection. Indeed, their comments echo Jean's perception of Kathleen Russell. Depictions of Jean included strength, principled, integrity, high standards, and respect (Personal correspondence with Phyllis Jones, October 13, 1994). She was considered by many to be the link with the past that began with Kathleen Russell's pioneering vision of nursing education and a continuation of a line of "brave, devoted women" (Brehaut, 1994).

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