

Profile of a Leader: ELIZABETH BREEZE

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The photograph of Elizabeth Gertrude Breeze on the Portrait Wall of the Presidents of the Registered Nurses Association of B.C. shows a fashionable, attractive woman with strong bone structure. But when it came to digging into her background for various nursing history projects, there were only bare bones. As with many nursing leaders of the past – and present – biographical information on her is sparse and sketchy. And this is one of Canadian nursing's greatest shames: a failure to collect and preserve stories of and information on the lives and contributions of nursing leaders. As a result, today's nursing historiographers often must act like detectives, forensic pathologists, or Egyptologists, dig from a variety of sources, and theorize from the barest of skeletons to provide a flesh-and-blood profile of nursing leaders.

Elizabeth Breeze was a B.C. nursing pioneer. She was Vancouver's first school nurse, appointed by the city's school board in 1910 to oversee health and wellbeing of school children. "School nurses," along with tuberculosis nurses, were Canada's first specialist practitioners. Perusal of the issues of *The Canadian Nurse* of the 1910s and 1920s shows many articles identifying these new specialists, who introduced far-reaching and innovative approaches to the public health problems of the era. Along with a few far-sighted government leaders, they recognized that care of children and families was primary to improvement of health in the community and nation. As a result, school nurses were often the first publically-funded health workers in most communities and generally arrived long before there was an organized public health department.

In Vancouver, Elizabeth Breeze recognized this trend and expanded her work force by serving as a role model. In preparation for the first expansion, she visited schools and school nurses in Montreal, Toronto, Chicago, Boston, and New York during May and June of 1914, and gave an address on this at the Alumnae Association of the Vancouver General Hospital. At first, she was the only school nurse, but by 1915, she was in charge of four more in Vancouver, and by 1921 there were eight nurses on staff. Under her direction, Vancouver's school nurses became the nucleus of the whole public health department for the city. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, she maintained the impetus. Her staff were exclusively involved in health promotion and prevention; none of her nurses was used for private duty nursing in



in 1936, when the unprecedented Metropolitan Health Committee of Greater Vancouver was formed, she was named Director of Public Health Nursing and supervised a staff of more than 40 staff nurses (Breeze, 1938). This revolutionary metropolitan unit was formed from the Vancouver City Health Department and its School Board, plus the health departments and school boards from surrounding municipalities ("Appointments," 1937). As part of the requirement for employment with Metropolitan Health, her nurses were required to have a public health certificate, diploma, or degree from a recognized university (Breeze, 1938).

Born in 1881 in Ontario, she moved with her family to Vancouver when she was about 10 years old. Breeze was a graduate of the nursing program at the Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto, and had training in affiliated schools in New York for courses that would not have been offered at the pediatric centre. She did private nursing for a few years before taking on the role as Vancouver's first school nurse.

As a leader, she appreciated the importance of the new trend toward university education for nurses, which had been introduced at the University of B.C. in 1919. In 1923, at age 38, she attended the University of California, Berkeley, and was granted a certificate in public health nursing (RNABC, 1983).

As part of her role in changing nursing and health care in the community, she recognized the importance of being active in professional organizations. She was a charter member of the Graduate Nurses Association of B.C. when it formed in 1912 and was immediately elected Secretary-Treasurer. She served continuously on the executive as the association worked toward registration legislation and, in

1918, was one of the first nurses registered. She became the fourth president of the Association from 1921 to 1925. She was also active in the Vancouver Graduate Nurses' Association, frequently serving on its executive, as well as in various public health societies. She was also active on the national scene, and in 1914 was appointed to the Public Health Committee of the Canadian National Association of Trained Nurses (CNATN), which was the early name of the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA). In 1923, she was elected president of the Public Health Nursing Section of the CNATN and was almost continuously on the executive of this section. In 1936, she was nominated as the official representative of B.C. on CNA's Dominion Registration Committee (RNABC, 1936).

She was not only active in nursing associations, but also active in educational associations. For example, she was appointed to the curriculum committee that rearranged high school studies in health education for the entire province of B.C. By the mid-1920s, she was teaching classes at the University of B.C.'s new Summer School for teachers, where the university's newly formed education department introduced courses in hygiene and child health. Before this, B.C. teachers were prepared only in the Normal Schools; the university's summer school programs were highly innovative (Zilm & Warbinek, 1994).

Elizabeth Breeze was anxious to involve teachers in promoting the health of children. She became co-author, with educational writer James Mace Address, of a health textbook used in secondary schools. The book, *Health Essentials for Canadian Schools*, was part of the "Canadian Hygiene Series" and was widely respected and popular and was reprinted in 1946 and remained in use for many years after that.

She died in Vancouver, April 19, 1938, at age 56, after a seven-month battle with cancer. Word of her death came just as *The Canadian Nurse* was going to press with her article describing the newly-formed Metropolitan Health Committee ("From the editor's desk," 1938). In a brief note in the journal, editor Ethel Johns wrote that the article had come about because of repeated requests for a report on "this outstanding achievement of her whole career" (p. 243). Johns went on: With characteristic modesty she refrained from saying anything about herself. Indeed there was no need, because between the lines, those who knew her will read the story of a woman who with untiring patience, courage, and wisdom helped to build up a great project. (p. 243)

But the moral of today's article might be: For those who did not know her, and for those who came in the generations after her and built upon the foundations she laid, there are only the barest bones of her life story available. Today's nursing leaders should take note, be less modest, and provide more of their stories for the nursing archives that are just beginning to be developed.

Authors

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