

FROM THE NNA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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In Honor of a World War II Cadet Nurse



THE NEBRASKA NURSES ASSOCIATION is pleased to honor a Nebraska World War II Cadet Nurse. In the midst of one of the darkest times in history, while soldiers were on the frontlines, the Cadet Nurse Corps served as a vital lifeline for both the wounded and those in need of care back home.

This is the story I had the privilege to hear from 99-year-old Margaret Henninger from Lincoln, Nebraska, one of 13 nurse cadets to graduate in 1947 from the Mary Lanning Hospital School of Nursing.

I always wanted to be a nurse. I grew up as a very naïve farm girl in Oxford, Nebraska. My folks had survived the dust bowl and the grasshopper invasion—they just did not have the funds to send me to be a nurse. As a cadet nurse, my tuition was paid 100% by the US government plus as a first-year cadet I was paid \$10 per month, second-year cadet was \$20 per month and third year was \$30 per month!

In 1947, nursing education was quite different from the structured programs we see today. The training of nurses in the World War II era was still largely hospital-based and focused heavily on practical, hands-on experience. As a first-year cadet, it necessitated exceptionally long days, 7 days a week to do 1 year of work in 3 months! At the completion of the first 3 months, we were capped and moved to the Mary Lanning Nurses Home and started work in the hospital doing 8-12 hours shifts. If we were on a night shift from 7:00 pm to 7:00 am, we could sleep from 1:00 am to 4:00 am if it were not busy, with the expectation to still be at class by 10:00 am with or without sleep. After capping, we could then be off 1 day a week.

The programs were typically run by hospitals, and the primary objective was to train nurses to meet the immediate staffing needs of the hospital. Nursing students, often referred to as “student nurses,” worked long hours in the hospital wards, learning by doing under

the supervision of experienced nurses. They provided a substantial portion of the nursing care in hospitals, which kept the costs of staffing down. Patients received a bath every day and a backrub every morning and evening.

Nursing education followed an apprenticeship model where students learned on the job. While they had some classroom education, the focus was heavily on practical, firsthand skills. Classroom instruction typically included basic anatomy, physiology, pharmacology, lab, and general nursing care, but was limited in comparison to the extensive practical experience they received.

Nursing students were subject to strict discipline, with a focus on order, cleanliness, and obedience. Codes of conduct for nurses were rigid, and students were expected to maintain high moral standards. Starched white dress uniforms were mandatory, and behavior both inside and outside the hospital was closely monitored. At the end of each year of training they received a blue stripe to wear on their uniform sleeve signifying the year of training.

As Margaret was finishing her nurses training, the war ended, and she was not called into service. She learned to drive a Model A car and went to work at Brewsters Hospital in Holdrege, Nebraska on the second floor which housed, medical, surgical and OB patients. There were no recovery rooms, and because they were short of nurses, if there was a laboring mom they stayed until she had delivered. She moved to Hastings and went to work at Mary Lanning on the night shift on the surgical floor. She was informed they “needed someone in OB.” Despite her protests that she had not been trained to do rectal exams (only doctors were allowed to do vaginal exams), she was told the nursing supervisor could do them for her—which she later learned she could not!!

Margaret married her Husband Don; a World War II Army veteran and they raised three children. When she returned to the workforce at a local nursing home, she was a supervisor over a wing of patients, and once again found herself working short staffed. Her pleas to administration were that families were expecting their loved ones to be bathed daily and cared for. The administrations solution was to have the patients “wait that didn’t have family” visiting them.

Margaret cared for her spouse at home even learning to run PICC lines at the age of eighty-five, until his death in 2009.

Although nursing was a respected profession, career advancement opportunities were limited in 1947. Nurses were often seen as subordinates to physicians, and there was little emphasis on leadership or specialization. Nursing in 1947 was predominantly a female profession. Male nurses were rare and often restricted in their roles. Additionally, racial segregation was still prevalent, especially in the United States. African American nurses faced barriers to entry into training programs, and those who were accepted were often restricted to segregated facilities.

In 1947, there was increasing recognition of the importance of public health and community nursing. Nurses were beginning to take on roles outside of hospitals in areas such as home care, maternal and child health, and tuberculosis care. In the years following World War II, there was a significant demand for trained nurses due to the war's impact on healthcare systems. The U.S. federal government created initiatives like the Cadet Nurse Corps during the war to train nurses quickly, and many of these efforts continued in various forms after the war. The profession slowly began to shift toward formalized education standards, with growing recognition of the need for academic degrees in nursing.

These young women answered the call of duty without hesitation, stepping into the nursing profession at a time when the world was desperate for healers. They trained tirelessly, often in grueling conditions, to ensure they were prepared to provide life-saving care to the soldiers who needed them most. The Cadet Nurses not only provided medical assistance, but they also offered comfort, compassion, and hope to those whose spirits were tested by the harsh realities of war.

In hospitals across the country, they filled the gaps left by those who went to serve abroad, ensuring that civilian and military hospitals continued to function. Their service helped ease the burden of a



Margaret Henninger RN & Angel

Thank you for recognizing the cadet program and its importance to nursing. If it had not been for the program, I would not have been able to realize my dream of becoming a nurse and it was such an important part of my life. Over the years of my nursing career, I had several of my patients tell me I was an angel. So, no matter where you work or teach, just remember how important

you are to all those people whose lives are touched by you and our profession.

I think God lays it upon a person's heart to go into nursing and I hope he considers me one of his nursing angels when I get to heaven too. Thank you again and bless you all for your dedication to this profession. I am proud and honored to have been a nurse.

healthcare system stretched to its limits, and their courage ensured that countless lives were saved.

Though they may not have worn combat uniforms, their contributions were no less heroic. They were soldiers in their own right, fighting a different battle—a battle for life, healing, and hope. Their work has had a lasting impact on the world of nursing and healthcare, paving the way for future generations of nurses.

Today, we salute the Cadet Nurses of World War II, whose legacy is one of honor, courage, and compassion. Your service will never be forgotten, and the world is forever grateful for the sacrifices you made in the name of healing and hope.

May your spirit continue to inspire, and may your legacy live on in the hearts of those who follow in your footsteps. 🌈

NNF Shifts Convention Fundraising Away from Silent Auction

The annual Silent Auction has been a spirited part of the Nebraska Nurses Association annual Vconvention for decades. Auctions in the past have raised between \$1500 - \$3000 each year for the Nebraska Nurses Foundation. Despite those successes, the NNF Board made the decision to follow-up their successful Nurses' Week Giving Day with another "giving event" at the Convention. The giving challenge was supported with a \$3000 matching pledge by an anonymous donor.

Promoting Nursing Innovation - NNF Clinical Project Grants are designed to provide funding for evidence-based practice, quality improvement or innovation projects conducted within clinical nursing settings.

Supporting the Next Generation - Each year the NNF,

in collaboration with the NNA, provides pre-licensure and graduate nursing education scholarships. The number awarded each year is only limited by the funds available and the fundraising at the Convention certainly helped with that.

Honoring our Legacy - Celebrate a Nurse! Recognize or memorialize a nursing colleague or mentor by donating to the NNF. The personal message from the donor is provided to the recipient (or their family) and donors are recognized on our website.

Final fundraising totals resulting from the challenge was \$6470 provided by 47 different donors!! The NNF appreciates the fantastic support from attendees at the Convention and "Friends of Nebraska Nurses" donors. 🌈