Final Chapter of the McLean Hospital School of Nursing Alumni Association

EDITOR’S NOTE
Although there are few diploma nursing programs left in the United States, their place in our history should not be forgotten, especially those from premier psychiatric hospitals. The first registered nursing program affiliated with a psychiatric hospital opened its doors in 1882. The program was the McLean Hospital School of Nursing (originally McLean Asylum Training School for Nurses), which was part of the first psychiatric hospital in the United States (founded in 1811 and originally part of Massachusetts General Hospital [MGH]), and the first psychiatric hospital to study the biological bases for mental illness.

The last class at McLean graduated in 1967. From that point on, McLean had a strong Alumni Association—but it was time to end. On Nurse’s Day this year, I was honored to be a speaker at the McLean Hospital Nurse’s Day Conference and Celebration. As we celebrated nurses at McLean, we also honored the closure of the McLean School of Nursing Alumni Association.

Dr. Beverly Bartlett has been President of the McLean School of Nursing Alumni Association for the past 30 years. She gave the opening keynote at the McLean Hospital Nurse’s Day Conference and Celebration, which served as official closure of the association. To preserve this history, we are publishing Dr. Bartlett’s speech along with reflections from Dr. Kelly Carlson, a Professional Development Specialist and Research Associate at McLean, and host and organizer for the McLean Nurse’s Day Conference and Celebration.

Mona Shattell, PhD, RN, FAAN
Editor

KEYNOTE ADDRESS
I am a proud graduate of McLean Hospital School of Nursing, class of 1968. I stand here representing 1,984 graduates. For 86 years, our school of nursing had a rich history of producing excellent—dare I say, the best—psychiatric nurses in the country, as well as nurses functioning in other venues.

I am the daughter of Lewis Bartlett, a 1939 graduate of McLean. When I decided to pursue nursing, my dad tried to steer me into a collegiate program. But “I wanted to be a real nurse like him” and went to McLean—a decision I have never regretted, even if it was a slower road to higher degrees.

I would like to tell you a little about our Alumni Association, our “training” at McLean, and the impact the McLean education had on our graduates. In 1882, McLean Hospital started a “Training School for Nurses.” It was not the first school of nursing, but it was the first in a psychiatric hospital.

We were a part of Massachusetts General Hospital and our school continued with close ties until closure.

As I have said, a total of 1,984 graduated from our school. Florence Dormer was our first graduate in 1885.

In 1888, the first men were admitted. A total of 36% of all graduates were male.

Many of our graduates entered the service of our country during World War II. “Trained” female nurses were commissioned in the Army and Navy Nurse Corps. Men were not allowed to be officers, but became medics or did other things. In my dad’s case, a Pharmacist’s Mate in the Navy—i.e., a medic. The Alumni Association was actively involved in the fight to have commissions for male nurses—something we take for granted today.

The McLean Hospital Nurses’ Alumni Association was a means for graduates to maintain ties with McLean. There were lavish Alumni gatherings. The outside of the tunnel at Higginson House was lined with tables of food, the centerpiece being a massive salmon. There were petit fours and sweets of all kinds. It was an occasion. In the evening, the gymnasium was decorated for dancing. I bowled with my brother in the gymnasium basement. I attended such gatherings and watched them slowly change to
Our meetings took place in Pierce Hall and Higginson House Living Room until we went to the DeMarnoff Building. It was a little sad to be there because none of us had any connection to it, except for some of us younger ones having known Dr. DeMarnoff. Thus the reason for our last meeting to be in Pierce Hall, inside the walls of McLean.

We always wanted to keep abreast of happenings with nursing at McLean. Yearly we requested updates at our meeting—we wanted to maintain our ties to McLean. Many of our men went on to anesthesia school—some eventually forming their own businesses, some teaching, and others working as CRNAs [certified registered nurse anesthetists]. Administration was another field that McLean men went into—both nursing admin and hospital administration. Graduates were medical surgical nurses, ER [emergency room] nurses, administrators, teachers, and, of course, psychiatric nurses, to name a few.

In 1990, we established the McLean Hospital Nurses’ Alumni Association Endowment for Nursing Research to support nursing research at McLean. A few of the research recipients came and presented their research, which pleased the membership greatly. Sheila Evans was a favorite of ours.

Our honorary members include Kathleen Atto, who was Director of Nursing from 1933 to 1942; Nancy Valentine, Director of Nursing from 1983 to 1993; Terry Bragg, Archivist; and Susan Boyce. Susan was originally in the class of 1968, but left after a probation period and found her calling as a teacher. Interestingly, both her parents were McLean graduates. She reconnected with her McLean roots and has been an active member of the association and organizer for her classes’ reunions. Our association joined in with McLean and MGH to hold a “Meet and Greet” at the 1990 ANA [American Nurses Association] convention in Boston.

What was it like to be a student at McLean? We spent 18 months here—our first 9 and our last 9. The other times were on affiliation at MGH, Children’s, and Boston Lying-In [BLI] Hospital. We had affiliating students here from MGH, Children’s, and other schools. The grounds were beautiful and just the right setting for a country girl like me. Walking up through the woods to the back fields to see the sunset was a wonderful break from studying. Dad remembered “Lookout Rock,” from which you could see the lights of Boston. I was never able to find that during my time at McLean.

My class was small, with 24 students starting out and ending with 22. We started our school experience with a tea in Higginson House Living Room. We soon learned to balance a tea cup with food and still shake hands, as we would experience teas all along our education. We learned to traverse the tunnels even in the black out of 1965. Cafeteria food left a lot to be desired, but Dom’s in Waverley Square had great subs.

Mildred Makin, our director, wrote a paper on the closure of nursing schools and the direction for collegiate education. When we entered school, we were told that universities would no longer honor our schooling and give us credit for it. If we were intending on furthering our education, it was suggested that we leave McLean and go to a collegiate program. None of my fellow students left the school, although many of us went on to obtain college degrees.

We started our careers on North Belnap I, which was chronic care for women. We learned to shower patients and straighten up units, which included washing the floor and furniture down. (Even when I last did floor duty in 1993, my patient units were always neat and clean. Some things just stay with you.) Thank goodness the men in our class did the floors and we did their furniture. Imagine being a new student nurse learning basics in a psychiatric ward.

We spent our probation period here at McLean and ended it with a ceremony at the chapel, where we received our caps and could now don the full starched white apron of our uniform. Classes were held in the basement of Higginson. We had our own nursing instructors. Anatomy and Physiology, Chemistry, and Psychology were taught by McLean physicians. The lab was open for our practice until they found a number of students not practicing making occupied beds, but making out in the beds.

We had a short break after probation and then went to MGH. We learned our basic medical surgical skills there. We staffed units and clinics. The men did pediatrics there also. Late night snacks in the cafeteria kept us going for all-night studying binges. The women went to Children’s Hospital for 3 months and then on to Boston Lying-In Hospital. The men joined us at BLI for the obstetrical experience.

We ended our schooling at McLean for another 9-month stint. I was on East House, which was female maximum security. We worked days, evenings, and weekends.

One day in the Day Room, a patient looked at me and said: “I know you.” I looked at her in bewilderment. Then she said, “you were the one carrying cases of beer up the fire escape stairs at Higginson House.” Blushing, I admitted to it. We needed to have some fun. There are many stories of our fun that I could share, from drinking at Beaver Brook to bringing wine into BLI our last Friday night there to celebrate. Our director Millie Makin called us out on the wine; we had already been called out at BLI for too-short skirts (when not in uniform). Following affiliating classes at BLI heard the stories about the skirts and wine, so I guess we were infamous.

Sheila Evans eloquently described being a student at McLean and being on East House. She mentioned Margarette Conrad in the article. I remember her and I also remember Ida Jean Orlando.
Pelletier and the first “Nursing Process.” I still have her first book.

We ended as we started—at the chapel. The start of a career for us and the closing of a nursing school for McLean.

Our graduates use phrases like: “The impact of McLean on my life was immense”; “I am grateful for the nursing education I received and the confidence and skills I developed to take me successfully on my own path.”

I would like to think that we made a difference in the world. We were unique graduates and practitioners. When in the Air Force Nurse Corps, I was requested to go to the Colonel’s office after my shift. She had found me without my cap on. I’d been going in and out of isolation rooms and just felt it was easier to do without. She stood; I sat, forgetting etiquette of standing until she sat. Then she started about the cap and I interjected my reasoning. She then asked me what school I graduated from and I told her McLean. She said, “I understand now,” and dismissed me. We did have a reputation.

Our graduates were the nurses staffing McLean and heading the nursing department for many years. I believe our last graduate here was Mary Grace.

We are closing our Alumni Association because it is time. My classmates are all in their 70s. Yearly meeting attendance has dwindled from its heyday. An attendance of 20 alumni is difficult today.

I have been President of the Alumni Association since 1981 and Vice President for the past 4 years. Our treasurer has been in office since 1984, taking over the secretary’s job in the early 2000s. Recruiting people to be officers and directors has become ever so difficult, obviously. It was easier when so many McLean graduates worked at McLean. They took on the responsibility of maintaining the Association. People like Vera Dunkley.

But it is with a great sadness that we close our books. Our alumni have a strong fondness and attachment to these brick buildings and what went on inside of them. It started them on their careers with a solid foundation. I just wanted to share some of the rich history of nursing that these walls at McLean hold. We, McLean graduates, will always walk through the tunnels and the halls here so that no one forgets that we were here.

Beverly Bartlett, PhD, RN

REFLECTIONS

As a McLean newcomer, it was my privilege to attend the last meeting of the McLean Hospital School of Nursing Alumni Association on Saturday, May 19. Linda Flaherty, Vice President of Patient Care Services; Dr. Scott Rauch, President of McLean; and Terry Bragg, McLean Archivist and Historian, were in attendance to bid farewell to the last group with direct and continuous connection to the original nurses’ training school. This marked a historic transition for McLean Hospital and the field of psychiatric–mental health nursing. McLean Asylum Training School for Nurses was the first of its kind in the world. The school opened in 1882, under the direction of Matron Linda Richards, the first woman to earn a diploma in nursing, and Medical Superintendent Dr. Edward Cowles, who learned the art of hospital administration during the Civil War (Bryan, 2014). Of note, Linda Richards was mentored in England by Florence Nightingale prior to returning to the United States and opening several schools of nursing (Wayne, 2014). Fifteen women graduated from the McLean training school in 1886 (Figure), the same year men were admitted (Nolan, 1993). McLean has long been at the forefront of progressive thinking.

In laying the foundation for the school, Richards and Cowles were greatly influenced by Dr. Thomas Kirkbride, who had opened several psychiatric facilities based on principles of non-restraint. Kirkbride believed that training nurses, moving away from the common attendant worker role, was

Continued on page 47.
Continued from page 4.

important to legitimize psychiatry as a medical science. All nurses admitted to McLean Asylum Training School for Nurses were “required to be sober, honest, truthful, trustworthy, punctual, quiet, orderly, cleanly, neat, patient, kind, and cheerful” (Massachusetts General Hospital, n.d., p. 1). At the same time, moral treatment was emerging as an organizing force for care practices, and institutions were looking to attract higher quality personnel. Educating nurses was not without controversy. Physicians feared that training nurses would threaten their professional status. Cowles reassured doctor colleagues in England by addressing the Medico-Psychological Association (Nolan, 1993).

At the McLean Asylum, the nurses are not trained to write theses and the like; they are quietly handed their diplomas when they are due, and there is rigid avoidance of promoting any spirit other than that of aiming at modest, quiet, unobtrusive devotion to honest work. (Church, 1987, p. 76)

Educating nurses at McLean was ground-breaking. This truly was the beginning of hospital-based mental health nursing as we know it today. Lucia Woodward, a student of Linda Richards, who peers at visitors to the nursing administration offices, served a long tenure as Matron of the Training School from 1884 to 1912.

According to Goodnow (1918), “It is the experience of asylum heads that nurses trained in general hospitals are not fitted for the care of patients who are mentally ill” (p. 168). Still, there continues to be much discussion among nurses about differences in mental and physical care. Goodnow (1918) suggested that “We do not yet appreciate the full meaning of his [Cowles’] work in establishing the training school at McLean Asylum” (p. 165). Establishing the school at McLean changed the landscape of psychiatric care by insisting on a level of competence and character for those caring for people with mental illnesses. Through the centuries, this tradition has continued with many former and present McLean Hospital nurses at the cutting edge of mental health nursing practice, education, and research.

As I spoke with alumni on May 19, I was struck by the myriad career paths they had taken after leaving school. Many assured me that their time at McLean Hospital School of Nursing had prepared them well for the future. Dr. Sonja Peterson had a distinguished career teaching psychiatric mental health nursing at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, while Dr. Beverly Bartlett pursued dual careers of nursing academic and bed-and-breakfast owner on the coast of Maine. I enjoyed conversations with educators, business owners, Vietnam Veterans, nurse anesthetists, and one psychiatric–mental health nurse still in practice. Vera Dunkley was given a tour of her old stomping grounds in Nursing Administration by Linda Flaherty. The class of 1968 talked of receiving special phone calls from Margaret Tibbitts, letting them know the good news that they had been accepted to the last graduating class of the nursing school. Few options existed for women looking to further their education, and many families did not see value in sending daughters to school. There were also several men in attendance at the Alumni meeting. In 1968, the school tuition was $900 per year. What a bargain. I hope to hear more from alumni to add to this brief history and reflection, to keep this historical conversation alive.

I was surprised and humbled by the Alumni Association’s generous donation toward Nursing Research at McLean. This will open possibilities to keep the McLean Hospital traditions of nursing practice, education, research, and innovation alive. In my office, there are two out-of-print books by Ida Jean Orlando Pelletier published in 1954 and 1961. These small books speak volumes, reminding us all once again we stand on the shoulders of giants. The giants are all the McLean Hospital School of Nursing alumni who generously donated to their association in appreciation of the education they received. McLean would not be the fine institution it is without the nursing school students who have wandered the hallways and tunnels, and those who still do.

REFERENCES


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