

## **CAPPING A CENTURY** **At 100, Bellin College Exemplifies the History of Nursing**

Susan Frost  
Published in *Voyager Magazine*, Spring 2010

When Louis B. Sullivan proclaimed “form follows function,” he was addressing new philosophies of architecture. As Bellin College (formerly Bellin College of Nursing) approaches its hundredth anniversary, moves into a building exclusively dedicated to the education of health care professionals, and begins its second century of education, its history mirrors the evolution of nursing from training to academic education. In the history of Bellin College, we see adaptation and architectural form following social, cultural and academic trends. But there is more to the story than buildings and educational systems. The Bellin College story is about young women not so very different than young women today, who are forging careers and developing independence. It is also a reflection of women’s history in Northeast Wisconsin and an unusual situation where women have opened a new field to men.

### **A CROSSROADS: THE MODERN PROFESSIONAL** **WOMAN MEETS THE COMMUNITY NEED**

At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century a cultural trend intersected with a Green Bay community need. It was a time when women across the nation were seeking professions, women’s colleges were on the rise, and the concept of the professional woman took hold. Health care was a vocation where women had already found a place but modern medicine now demanded professional training. Nineteenth century convention extended a wariness of the wage-earning nurse and questioned the respectability of the profession.<sup>2</sup> By the dawn of the twentieth century, the need for nurses and the “new woman” broke through cultural barriers and nursing as a viable career for women was established through nurses training schools. History provides an understanding of the vigilance required to maintain a high degree of respect and professionalism.

In 1907, Dr. J. J. Bellin purchased the fifteen-bed General Hospital at Adams and Walnut Streets but by 1908, his practice grew too large to run a practice and a hospital. He invited two Bethesda Hospital deaconesses from Cincinnati, Ohio—Delia Scheible and Matilda Giese, a Green Bay native—to manage the hospital. The German deaconess order’s mission was training nurses and administering hospitals.<sup>3</sup> Soon other deaconesses followed and under their auspices the hospital thrived<sup>4</sup> but after two years, they needed space and they needed staff. Opening a nursing school gave them staff and Bellin’s purchase of the spacious D. W. Brett Home on Webster Avenue for a hospital gave them room. In October of 1909, the deaconesses incorporated under the name Deaconess Sanitarium and Training School.

For young women entering the profession, the arduous training program produced only one graduate from the first class of three. Two students dropped out—one for health reasons and one to marry—leaving Eleanor Martensen, Class of 1912, the first and only graduate. Soon young women from throughout the state began joining the ranks of trained Deaconess graduates.

The price of professional training was high, not in financial terms but in personal commitment and physical endurance. Qualifications in 1917 state applicants must

1 Nancy Woloch. *Women and the American Experience*. Knopf, New York, 1984.

2 Charles Charles. *The Intervention of a Friendly Power*. *Journal of Women’s History*, V ol. 19, No. 3, 2007.

3 Charles Charles. *The Intervention of a Friendly Power*. *Journal of Women’s History*, V ol. 19, No. 3, 2007.

4 Ann Poh. *Bellin College of Nursing History*. Bellin College Archives, Green Bay, WI 1988.

be between 20 and 30 years old, hold a high school diploma or its equivalent<sup>5</sup> and must show satisfactory evidence of Christian character to be attested to by their pastor and their teachers.<sup>6</sup> The school provided training, lodging, board, and laundry along with a monthly stipend of \$5.00. In return, student nurses worked from 6:00 a.m. until 7:00 p.m. and were on-call twenty-four hours a day. They were responsible for caring for the sick, carrying patients up and down the spiral staircase of the Brett home, cooking, washing, cleaning, and mowing the hospital lawn. Evening classes were held “a couple of hours several times a week.”<sup>7</sup> The 1917 handbook instructions in professional decorum explain that “Nurses in the discharge of their duty must observe the strictest secrecy and avoid tale-bearing or gossip; they must bear constantly in mind the importance of their calling and must show at all times self-denial, forbearance, gentleness and good temper...”<sup>8</sup>

The transition from training school to academic institution began with converting the Brett home into a nurse’s residence after the completion of a new hospital in 1916.

The elements of a professional education follow in the comprehensive 1919 curriculum which delineated a three-year program with courses providing a deeper understanding of the field and included dietetics, psychology, bacteriology and ethics along with nursing practice. Courses were taught by superintendents of the school and leading community physicians.<sup>9</sup> At this time, the first text books appeared, reflecting a more academic study. Reading and writing German, the language of science and the deaconess order, was required.

Personal correspondence provides a glimpse of the commitment and struggle to maintain professionalism. When a young student was in jeopardy of being expelled in 1922, her guardian pleaded with the superintendent to reinstate her. In a series of letters, the uncle stresses to both the superintendent and the girl the need for her to learn a profession that would make her self-supporting.<sup>10</sup>

### **MID-CENTURY ADAPTATION: A NEW PROFESSIONALISM**

World War II may have reshaped American culture but in an equally dramatic way, it reshaped Bellin Memorial Hospital School of Nursing. Superintendent Alida Jacobson reported to her board in 1942, that the conscription of nurses was a strong possibility and that the school was prepared to meet it. The following year the Cadet Nursing Corps,<sup>11</sup> part of the government’s Public Health Services effort to provide a large number of nurses in a short period of time (1943-48), became part of the program and pages of the school’s scrapbooks announce a large number of graduates joining the military.

The school’s affiliation with the Corps not only allocated subsidies for improvements, it raised the bar for nursing education and aided in developing the school’s future.<sup>12</sup> Jacobson envisioned the school’s post-war needs advising deficiencies would not be overlooked in the future. The school needed to raise academic standards for faculty, to add a library, and the government’s Cadet Nursing Consultant advised that patients and students be housed in separate buildings. In 1942 new courses appeared. Microbiology, sociology, social problems in nursing and the history of the profession reflected more broadly educated nurses with a deepened academic background. By 1943, city physicians were over-burdened and teaching at the nursing school became an untenable situation resulting in the hiring of a professional teaching staff. Along with the trend toward broader experiences, Bellin student activities expanded and the school archives recount teas, balls and alumni galas.

5 Ann Poh. *Bellin College of Nursing History*. Bellin College Archives, Green Bay, WI 1988.

6 Bellin College Archives, *1928 Bellin Yearbook*, Green Bay, WI 1928.

7 Bellin College Archives, Scrapbook, Green Bay, WI [date unknown].

8 Ann Poh. *Bellin College of Nursing History*. Bellin College Archives, Green Bay, WI 1988.

9 Ann Poh. *Bellin College of Nursing History*. Bellin College Archives, Green Bay, WI 1988.

10 Bellin College Archives, Green Bay, WI [date unknown].

11 Office of the Public Health Services Historian.

[http://www.lhncbc.nlm.nih.gov/apdb/phsHistory/resources/cadetnurse/nurse\\_text.html](http://www.lhncbc.nlm.nih.gov/apdb/phsHistory/resources/cadetnurse/nurse_text.html)

12 Office of the Public Health Services Historian.

[http://www.lhncbc.nlm.nih.gov/apdb/phsHistory/resources/cadetnurse/nurse\\_text.html](http://www.lhncbc.nlm.nih.gov/apdb/phsHistory/resources/cadetnurse/nurse_text.html)

Returning to post-war normalcy was as difficult for the school as for the population at-large. Nurses were scarce, patients abundant and serious students rare, making 1946 a difficult year.<sup>13</sup> When, by 1951, the situation had not eased, the school made an unprecedented decision: they would stop admitting students to the first year class and would close the school for two years. Nursing schools were suffering. A few blocks north, St. Mary's Hospital School of Nursing, established in 1903, closed<sup>14</sup> leaving no locally accessible nursing programs. During the two-year hiatus—from 1953 to 1955—the school built Charlotte Fowler Residence, a building that would house eighty students and contain a floor of classrooms on Webster at Cass Streets next to Bellin Memorial Hospital<sup>15</sup> marking the birth of a modern nursing education institution.

When reopened as Bellin Memorial Hospital School of Nursing, it became a leading-edge institution, accredited by the National League for Nursing. Partnering with the University of Wisconsin Extension, Bellin School of Nursing became one of only six schools with university teaching facilities.<sup>16</sup> Nursing students acquired English, music, and physical education credits in addition to their regular Bellin course work. At the university, they mixed with traditional university students for a better collegiate experience. "The Blue Goose," as the students fondly dubbed it, bussed students to the University campus and after evening classes, Ada Waite, Charlotte Fowler's housemother, greeted them with hot pea soup, cheese sandwiches, and a willing ear.<sup>17</sup>

Although the Bellin story appears to be a women's story, it is equally the story of the profession within our society. The dramatic changes that ensued after the war, – the GI Bill, women's liberation, and the dire need for nurses – changed the feminine fiber of the profession. Men were also breaking gender barriers. In 1958, Bellin School of Nursing broke with tradition and opened the door to its first male student, Ronald Jahnke.

In the late 1960s, unprecedented numbers of women began entering the work force and, in a movement that reflected their grandmothers' search for professional careers, the women's movement of the 1960s brought women back to school as well.<sup>18</sup> Two initiatives were taken to make the school more accessible. First, the ban on married nursing students was lifted. In a 1969 National Nurses Week article,<sup>19</sup> Mrs. Marlene Flesia, a Bellin student, was quoted as saying although she understands many nursing schools do not accept married students, if society wants more nurses, it should make it easier to pursue a career. Then, to allow students to earn money for tuition, the college classes were dismissed during the summer and students were offered paid experience as aides in the hospital.

Since its founding, a need for additional space has been a continuous struggle as the institution adapted to modern health care education needs. One resolution was to allow students to live off campus. This move freed the Charlotte Fowler Residence to be converted into administration offices. When the school continued to grow, it moved into remodeled space within the new Bellin Psychiatric Clinic across the street in 1994 and the Fowler property was razed.

## **WORKS WELL WITH OTHERS: A TRADITION OF PARTNERING**

The Bellin College partnering spirit has enhanced the scope of nursing education. As early as 1942, students were sent to Cook County School of Nursing in Chicago for six months of clinical experience in pediatrics, psychiatry and neurology. Later, partnerships with Mt. Sinai Hospital obstetrical department and Children's Hospital in Milwaukee, and later Winnebago State Hospital in Oshkosh, brought in-depth clinical experiences closer to home.

<sup>13</sup> Ann Poh. *Bellin College of Nursing History*. Bellin College Archives, Green Bay, WI 1988.

<sup>14</sup> St. Mary's Hospital web site, <http://www.stmgb.org/Scripts/pageview.asp?id=71>

<sup>15</sup> Ann Poh. *Bellin College of Nursing History*. Bellin College Archives, Green Bay, WI 1988.

<sup>16</sup> Ann Poh. *Bellin College of Nursing History*. Bellin College Archives, Green Bay, WI 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Ann Poh. *Bellin College of Nursing History*. Bellin College Archives, Green Bay, WI 1988.

<sup>18</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*. Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Book Group. 1992.

<sup>19</sup> Green Bay Press Gazette.

Dean Diane Koller announced the expansion to a four-year baccalaureate degree beginning in 1984 through a partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay which resulted in the name change to Bellin College of Nursing.<sup>20</sup> The agreement additionally allowed graduates after 1971, to transfer Bellin credits into the university. Twenty-five years later, this agreement was made with St. Norbert College. In addition to their academic partnership with the University of Wisconsin - Green Bay and St. Norbert, the school has articulation agreements with Silver Lake College, College of the Menominee Nation and Lakeland College that allow students to move into a baccalaureate nursing program.

### **COMING OF AGE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

The past decade has thrust the college into their new century with the adoption of the latest technology. Today's challenges in educating health care professionals continue to be met through a distance learning program that reaches students all over the country opening the opportunity to earn masters degrees in Nursing Leadership with options in Nursing Education and Administration. This year, the College expanded the scope of health care education with a baccalaureate degree in the Radiologic Sciences.

One hundred years has changed medicine and nursing as much as it has changed education. The evolution from Deaconess Sanatorium and Training School for Nurses to Bellin Hospital School of Nursing and finally to Bellin College, follows the struggle for professional status of nurses and health care education. The new Bellin College campus symbolizes an ongoing commitment to health care professional education on the highest levels available. The long tradition of flexibility and adaptation to social and academic requirements is deeply tied to Bellin College's new state-of-the art campus and its future.

---

20 Ann Poh. *Bellin College of Nursing History*. Bellin College Archives, Green Bay, WI 1988.