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Contact: Robert Smith
Director of Public Relations
Visiting Nurse Association
(214) 689-2609

THE VISITING NURSE ASSOCIATION CELEBRATES 75 YEARS OF CARE

The year 2009 marks the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Visiting Nurse Association in Dallas. A small group of volunteer nurses from the Dallas County Public Health Nurses Association, led by Lillian Beckett, a Dallas public school nurse, went into the community to provide desperately needed nursing care for the poor sick, disabled, and dying during the Great Depression.

Realizing that the critical need for this care was greater than what these few volunteer nurses could provide, 12 prominent Dallas club women and 13 public health nurses met on April 6, 1934 to organize the Dallas Visiting Nurse Association. An official announcement was made on May 12, the birth date of Florence Nightingale, of the creation of the nonprofit home care organization. Its purpose was to “give service in the home to invalids, mothers and babies, post operative cases and to patients in need of periodic treatments.”

The first office of the Visiting Nurse Association was in a building basement on 1901 N. Harwood Street, where the Dallas Museum of Art is now located. A volunteer secretary sat on a wooden box used as a chair. The typewriter was borrowed and had to be returned to its owner periodically. The first month’s rent of \$10 was paid by an employee at St. Paul Hospital. Subsequent rent was donated by the National Council of Jewish Women: Greater Dallas Section and the Junior League of Dallas.

Sadie Lefkowitz was elected first president of the board of directors of the Visiting Nurse Association in 1934. Her leadership was vital to the success of the fledgling organization, which had a bank balance of \$4.61 in December of that year. The Visiting

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Nurse Association had so little money that alumnae nurses of Parkland hospital made donations to pay the transportation costs for the volunteer visiting nurses.

Mrs. Lefkowitz acquired needed equipment and supplies from the many women's organizations she was associated with in Dallas. Donations from Dallas community leaders and service organizations kept the Visiting Nurse Association afloat through 1935, when it became funded as an affiliate of the Community Chest (later renamed the United Way). The application had stated, "The purpose of the Dallas Visiting Nurse Association is to give skilled nursing care in the home to those who cannot afford to pay for such service and would otherwise go uncared for."

In January 1935, the Visiting Nurse Association was able to hire its first part-time paid nurse. An anonymous gift also made it possible to hire the first executive director and nurse supervisor.

During its first full year of operation, the Visiting Nurse Association made 6,500 home care visits to 739 patients. Mothers and their infants received 2,500 nurse visits; 4,000 visits were to 414 acutely ill patients. The Visiting Nurse Association reported in 1935 that no calls for service in the city had been refused and patients were cared for irrespective of race, color, sex, or creed. Nurses went into the segregated sections of Dallas, the tent cities, cardboard houses, tourist camps, and trailers to provide life-giving care.

By 1936, seven nurses were employed part time by the Visiting Nurse Association, making 18 to 20 home visits a day. The organization hired its first African-American nurse that same year. In 1939, Georgia Bates became the first full-time nurse. Her salary was paid by the Highland Park Methodist Church to provide nursing services in largely Hispanic West Dallas.

Under Mrs. Lefkowitz's leadership, an association with Parkland and Baylor Hospitals

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was developed to care for mothers and their infants at home. One third of all babies born in Dallas in 1938 were under the care of the Visiting Nurse Association. The demand for VNA nurses grew so large that services were expanded to include patients who could afford to pay for care.

Requests for the nurses to serve areas outside Dallas County became so frequent that branch offices were eventually set up to reduce their travel time. A Kaufman office opened in 1974, one in McKinney in 1979, and an office in Fort Worth in 1981. The Visiting Nurse Association added an office in Denton when it merged with Ann's Haven Hospice in 1995. The Visiting Nurse Association's Dallas headquarters has been at 1440 W. Mockingbird Lane since 1992 and houses the largest single Meals on Wheels kitchen in the United States.

The Visiting Nurse Association today is giving needed care to frail, sick, and disabled individuals in thousands of homes in Dallas and the surrounding area. Its programs have expanded to include hospice, rehabilitative therapies, long-term care, and other services that allow patients to be cared for in their homes.

As the Visiting Nurse Association celebrates 75 years of service, it gratefully acknowledges the continued leadership and support in the communities of Northeast Texas that have made this possible. VNA's Jubilee celebration honors those nurses, who in 1934 cared for the sick, infirm, and disabled during a time of great economic hardship. The anniversary also recognizes the individuals and organizations in Dallas who supported those efforts and gave life to an organization that 75 years later continues to provide needed care in our community.

The Visiting Nurse Association's 75th anniversary celebration in 2009 is co-chaired by Peggy and daughter Catherine Carr, with Lyda Hill serving as honorary chair. The theme of the Visiting Nurse Association's diamond jubilee year is "Roots of Life."

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The jubilee gala will be held on May 2, 2009 at the Trinity River Audubon Center in Dallas and will benefit the Visiting Nurse Association's home care, hospice, and Meals on Wheels programs. Linda Slaughter is chairing the gala and Bank of America is the presenting sponsor. Sponsorship and ticket information can be obtained by calling (214) 689-2211 or online at www.vnatexas.org.



Dallas women's club members and VNA nurses (1936).



Sadie Lefkowitz, first president of the Visiting Nurse Association board of directors.



VNA nurse with mother and child (1936).



Georgia Bates making a home visit in West Dallas (1946).

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