

The Visting Nurses Association of Texas Celebrates

175

YEARS of CARE

By Robert Smith

The year 2009 marks the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Visiting Nurse Association of Texas. 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 care to the poor sick, the infirm, new mothers and their babies, and the disabled during the Great Depression.

“During the early months of February and March 1934 there was a pressing need brought to the attention of the Dallas Public Health Nurses Association. The need was bedside nursing in the homes. Many persons were fortunate enough to be able to employ a full-time private duty nurse when one of their family became ill, but these constitute a minority. Many were those who, when illness struck, were unable to pay for any kind of medical care, much less nursing service. These persons presented and still do, a grave problem. The need for bedside nursing care in the homes of the sick poor was made more pressing by the fact that Dallas hospitals offering such service were filled to overflowing and with hundreds on the waiting list. Subsequently, these patients were forced to languish on beds of illness in their homes with no one to give bedside nursing care and only an occasional visit from one of the five field nurses of the health department.”

– *The Dallas Daily Times Herald*,
October 30, 1938

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 Dallas 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 of St. Paul Hospital

in Dallas. 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 Dallas 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 organization had so little money that nurses from Parkland Hospital in Dallas 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 community leaders and service organizations kept the Dallas Visiting Nurse Association afloat through 1935, when it became funded as an affiliate of the Community Chest of Greater Dallas (later renamed the United Way of Metropolitan Dallas). 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 Dallas 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, Gertrude Hosmner, from Indian territory in Nevada.

“One case reported by Miss [Gertrude] Hosmer to the board was that of an 11-year-old boy who was dying from an acute form of abdominal trouble. The nurse found him protected from the springs by a very thin, worn and knotty mattress, no pillow, with a half-starved 12-month-old baby near him on the bed. The quilt, which covered him, was shared at night by three other members of the family. The nurse went in daily to take the patient’s temperature, bathe his hot hands and face and to teach the mother how to apply the hot compresses which brought the child relief, and to advise her concerning the necessary diet and sanitation.”

– a Dallas newspaper, 1935

During its first full year of operation, the Dallas 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 Dallas 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.

“Many of the cases we treat are of protracted illnesses, which the hospitals cannot take. Simply because the patients suffer disease for a long time should not, however, deprive them of proper attention. We go into homes which, in many cases, have not even been visited by doctors. Recently, we received a call from a girl of 10 who asked that a nurse come to see her mother. The mother had been in an automobile accident three weeks before, and since the accident had been suffering with a broken hip as well as broken ribs, without knowing the extent of her injuries, and with no one to care for her but the small daughter.”

– Sadie Lefkowitz, 1934

By 1936, seven nurses were employed part time by the Dallas 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 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 Dallas Visiting Nurse Association.

Services expanded through community support to include a loan closet and supply chest consisting of ice bags, hot water bottles, wheelchairs, crutches, layettes, bed linens, gauze dressings, and bandages. Medicines, milk, and food are provided in emergency cases, especially for infants. The nursing service is supplemented by the distribution of food, bed linens, clothing, and other necessities for the patients and their families, through the assistance of several clubs.

– a Dallas newspaper, January 2, 1938



An innovative home care program was launched by the Dallas Visiting Nurse Association in 1957 when it began providing “homemaker services.” A staff of four women was trained to go into homes during family emergencies. The homemakers’ duties included cleaning, shopping, preparing meals, caring for children, and providing other assistance to help keep families together when a parent in the household was ill or absent. The program was an early model of homemaker services that would care for the elderly and disabled, which was spearheaded 14 years later by the Dallas Visiting Nurse Association.

By 1969, the Dallas Visiting Nurse Association had grown from its original handful of volunteer nurses to a professional and administrative staff of 47 that included 22 registered nurses, 15 home health aides, a social work consultant, and two therapists who were employed on a contract basis. The orga-

nization's programs expanded to include long-term care, rehabilitative therapies, Meals on Wheels, and other services that allowed patients to be cared for in their homes. In 1978, the Dallas Visiting Nurse Association became the first hospice chartered in Texas. Requests for these nurses to provide care outside Dallas County became so great that branch offices were created to serve other Texas counties. A Kaufman office opened in 1974, one in McKinney in 1979, and an office in Fort Worth in 1981. A Denton branch was added in 1995 with the merger with Ann's Haven Hospice. The name of the organization was changed to the "Visiting Nurse Association of Texas," with headquarters in Dallas that houses the largest Meals on Wheels kitchen in the United States. Today, the Visiting Nurse Association of Texas has a staff of over 800. In fiscal year 2008, the Visiting Nurse Association of Texas made nearly 50,000 home care visits, in addition to providing other health-related services. Its home care professionals now utilize laptop computers for assessments and treatment plans, an electronic medical record system, and telehealth monitoring. Many things have changed for the Visiting Nurse Association of Texas since 1934, but not its dedication and commitment to caring for the frail elderly, sick, disabled, and dying. The Visiting Nurse Association of Texas' Diamond Jubilee celebration in 2009 honors those nurses, who in 1934 provided life-giving care in a time of great economic hardship. The anniversary also recognizes the individuals and organizations that supported those efforts and gave life to an organization that 75 years later continues to provide needed care to thousands of patients in Texas. The theme of the Visiting Nurse Association of Texas' Diamond Jubilee year is "Roots of Life." A special exhibit of archival photos celebrating its 75-year history will be on display from April 1 through May 31, 2009 at the J. Erik Jonsson Central Library in Dallas. A jubilee gala will be held May 2, 2009 at the Trinity River Audubon Center in Dallas to benefit the Visiting Nurse Association of Texas' home care, hospice, and Meals on Wheels programs. Information about the Visiting Nurse Association of Texas' Diamond Jubilee can be obtained by contacting Robert Smith at smithr@vnatexas.org or 214-689-2609.



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