



HOLDREGE PUBLIC SCHOOLS FOUNDATION

Giving Back to Education

HHS Alumni Recognition Feature!

Dear HHS Alumni and HPS Foundation Supporters,

Holdrege High School is fortunate to have many very successful graduates. We are excited to continue sharing the stories of some of those HHS Alums thanks to the journalistic talents of Kristine (Long) Jacobson, Class of 1990.

We also welcome your suggestions and comments.

Sincerely,
*Teresa Kroll, Chairman
HPS Foundation Committee*

Sheila Exstrom - Class of 1960

HHS grad's nursing career spans more than 50 years and culminates with induction to the Nebraska Nurse's Association Hall of Fame.

By Kristine Jacobson

When nursing students around the country take their computerized nurse licensing exams, they may be answering questions developed by a Holdrege High School alumna.

Sheila Exstrom, class of 1960, enjoyed various roles of a nursing career that spanned more than 50 years. From bedside to emergency room care, launching a hospital's coronary care unit, leading and teaching nursing staff and students, and overseeing the state's nurse licensing exams, Sheila loved it all.

In the spring of 2015, Sheila was inducted into the Nebraska Nurse's Association Hall of Fame, one of just four nurses to be awarded the honor in the state's history. "That was absolutely the most overwhelming thing that ever happened to me," Sheila said of the honor.

One of her greatest contributions to nursing was her nine years of work leading the team that computerized the national nurse's licensing exam. But, she's had many more contributions to nursing in Nebraska throughout her career

servicing in nearly every role that a nurse could serve.

"Nursing is the most perfect, perfect profession to get into because it is multiple professions rolled into one," Sheila said. "You can be a direct caregiver, which was very satisfying for me, or you can become a supervisory person. You can become an administrative person. You can become a consultant or an educator."

Nursing Education

Sheila's desire to be a nurse was evident as a young child. "My mom tells me I was always going to be a nurse," Sheila said. "Even as a young girl, she said 'you never played dolls with your dolls, you always played hospital with your dolls.' I can't remember ever not wanting to be a nurse."

Her family moved to Holdrege from Axtell when she was in fifth grade, and she attended the old Lincoln School and then the old Junior/Senior High. "I liked school, and I liked my teachers," Sheila said of her early years in Holdrege. "There was some real advantages that Holdrege had. I think they had a wonderful school system. They were small enough that families could look out for each other and know each other."

During her summers in high school and after high school graduation, Sheila worked at Bethphage Mission in Axtell (now Mosaic). She graduated from HHS at age 17 and had to be 18 to attend nurse's training, so she continued to work at Bethphage while waiting for her next step.

Her dream job was to work in the emergency room at Cook County Hospital in Chicago, where she could be part of an inner-city high-action emergency room. "I was ready to resuscitate every drunk in the gutter," she said. But, her dad, Eugene Exstrom, wasn't so keen on that idea.

So, instead, she headed to Omaha and studied at the Immanuel Hospital School of Nursing. She graduated in 1964 with the hopes of becoming a staff nurse. However, it didn't take long for her supervisors to realize her leadership potential and passion for nursing, and they asked her to be weekend staff supervisor. She worked every weekend for two years, while at the same time earning her bachelor's degree in nursing from the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

She received her degree in 1968 and began working in the ER at Immanuel, which she described as the "knife and gun club of north Omaha." During that same year, she and a fellow nurse friend were sent to the Kansas University Medical Center to learn about starting a coronary care unit at Immanuel. Sheila eventually stepped into the role of teaching other nurses how to care for cardiac patients in the new care unit. "That's sort of how I got edged into teaching," she said.



Sheila Exstrom - Class of 1960

She went onto to become the Director of In-Service Education and the Director of Nursing at Immanuel and also earned a master's degree in adult education in 1973.

In 1980, she was ready for a new challenge and accepted a job as the Assistant Administrator for Nursing at Lincoln General Hospital. She was soon promoted to Assistant Administrator for Patient Care Services in 1984 and remained in that position until 1987.

The move to Lincoln allowed her to eventually earn a PhD in adult education from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1997. During her time in Lincoln, Sheila experienced a bit of Hollywood as she was assigned to be the technical advisor for the academy-award winning movie "Terms of Endearment" starring Debra Winger, Shirley MacLaine, and Jack Nicholson. A portion of the movie was filmed at Lincoln General Hospital.

Sheila found out about her assignment when she read it in the newspaper. Her role was to advise the actors on proper medical techniques like giving shots and taking rectal temperatures. She recalls Jack Nicholson asking for her advice on how to act out a fainting spell. Her other task was to ensure that the movie filming didn't disrupt normal hospital functions. She was paid for her work on the movie and was listed in the film's movie credits. "It was an experience I was pleased to have," Sheila said of her movie role. And, she was especially pleased that the film won several academy awards in 1984, including best picture.

Teaching Nurses

In 1988, she began work for the Nebraska Department of Health as the nursing education consultant for the board of nursing, a job she held for 25 years. Her job was to work with the state's nursing schools to monitor their curriculum and standards and be a resource for nursing staff and administrators.

When she started that position, nursing schools were generally associated with hospitals. During her time there, the hospital training schools closed, and the state transitioned to training nurses at Nebraska's five nursing schools in Omaha, Lincoln, Kearney, Scottsbluff, and Norfolk.

She enjoyed talking with the more than 1,000 nursing graduates in Nebraska each year. She impacted nursing education in Nebraska by bringing all the school's deans together for regular meetings and encouraging them "to care about Nebraska as a whole" and not "be competitive with each other."

"We've got to all work together to have Nebraska have a high pass rate, which we do," she said.

She also has taught graduate nursing classes at Nebraska Wesleyan.

"I think I've impacted nurses to love learning," she said.

Sheila was also asked to lead a small nationwide committee for the National Council of State Boards of Nursing to convert the national nurse's licensing exam from a pen and paper two-day exam to a computerized exam. This task spanned for nine years and involved trips to Chicago nearly every six weeks for committee work and drafting and researching questions. With the help of subcommittees, they drafted thousands of questions and approved each question that went into the exam.

"It was a wonderful experience," Sheila said of the committee work. "It was a research project that turned out so perfect." Because of her work on that committee, she was awarded the Meritorious Service Award from the National Council of State Boards of Nursing at a ceremony in Philadelphia in 2009.

She has received many awards throughout her career, but it culminated with her greatest honor of being inducted into the Nebraska Nurse's Association Hall of Fame in February 2015. She is only the fourth Nebraska nurse to receive the honor.

Sheila never married, which she said made it easier for her to focus on her nursing career without having to juggle family life as well. But, even then, nursing isn't an easy job. "I think people think it's just caring for people, and it's patting their backs, and it's not," she said. "I always tell anyone who is interested in going into nursing is take the hardest classes you can take in high school. Be sure you take the sciences. Take chemistry. Take physiology. Because that's where nursing is at right now."

She credits her success to the early involvement and encouragement of her parents, Eugene and Merinda, and her people skills. "I think that I have the skill to be pretty blunt to get to the bottom of an issue, and I think I have an ability to draw people out so that everybody can feel heard and part of the solution making," Sheila said. "I think people see me as that. They don't see me as a 'gotcha' person coming out to find a problem but as a person who can help you find a way to success."

She also said she has been encouraged by the principle that "success breeds success. You have some success, and you are not afraid to go out and try something new."

Sheila retired in 2013, and upon her retirement, the governor honored her as an Admiral in the Navy of the Great State of Nebraska to recognize her 25 years of service with the state.

She is now looking forward to new challenges in retirement, including more volunteering with the Lincoln Literacy Council and writing a book.

About Us

The mission of the HPS Foundation is to support and enhance the educational efforts of students and teachers of Holdrege Public Schools by providing funding for innovative and challenging programs, learning experiences, and activities.

Holdrege Public Schools Foundation

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