RIMJ Centennial: A personal reminiscence of a 20th-Century nurse

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RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR of the Rhode Island Medical Journal, thoughts of my mother come to mind. She was born on January 18, 1918, one year after the Journal was first published.

A hospital and public health nurse in New York City, she lived much of what is described in this special edition: the maladies, miracles and medical war preparedness of the 20th Century.

Mom often said she became a nurse because of her oldest sister, Lillian, who contracted tuberculosis as young woman. Lillian was 20 and about to marry a young man named Joe. As her condition deteriorated, she was placed in a sanatorium. Mom would visit her every weekend, with her mother and Joe. Her desire to become a nurse stemmed from that experience.

When Lillian died of TB, and mom was old enough, she decided to go to nursing school, and three years later she graduated. It was during World War II, and she spent her post-graduate years working in hospitals in New York. There was a shortage of nurses and doctors, who were engaged in the war effort, and she often told me how strenuous it was, standing on her feet for 12-hour shifts, six days a week, taking the subway and bus home, and then going to volunteer at the Red Cross center to roll bandages and pack medical equipment to be sent overseas.

Mom was dedicated to her profession, proud of her nursing school’s distinctive cap and pin and Navy blue wool cape, which she wore to work every day that I can remember as a child. But she told me not to become a nurse. “You have to stand too much,” she said. “Do something with books, or writing, where you’re not on your feet all day.”

Eventually, after college, I decided on journalism and entered graduate school. On the first day of J-School Professor Taft asked each student, many pursuing second careers, to rise and explain what made us decide on a career in journalism, and who influenced us the most in this endeavor.

Answers flew: To travel the world as a foreign correspondent...to investigate corruption...Watergate...Walter Cronkite...Woodward & Bernstein...Gloria Steinem...

“I said, “I like to write and my mom.”

“Is she a newspaper journalist?” Professor Taft asked.

“No, a nurse. But she told me to be a writer or else something with books, where you don’t have to stand on your feet all day long for 12 hours at a time.”

“Sit down, young lady,” he said. He was very stern.

“Yes, sir,” I said, “Mom would like that.”

I know mom would enjoy reading this Centennial issue of the Journal, because the era covered within its pages was her era. She was a proud member of the medical community during those tumultuous times of wars and epidemics.

When she stopped working at the age of 70, she continued to volunteer in her...
local community hospital. She wheeled a cart of books to patients’ rooms, and asked if she could read to them. She finally got to sit down in a hospital.

During her retirement years, she would visit us more frequently in Rhode Island. Once when she and my sister came to visit, they decided to drive to Cape Cod for the weekend. As they walked past a church, mass was getting out and mom spotted him, Joe. Her sister’s fiancé. She walked up to the church steps where Father Joe was greeting his parishioners.

“Joe,” she said. “I can’t believe it’s you.”

“Jeanne,” he said. My sister said he look stunned. They hadn’t seen each other since 1940. From that point on, they corresponded.

And so, on this occasion of the Centennial of the Journal, I will conclude by saying, happy 100th birthday RIMJ – long may you live – and happy 99th birthday to my mom, who passed away 11 years ago.

Somewhere, I know she is sitting with a cup of coffee and reading a book or newspaper or perhaps this issue of the Journal, if there is celestial connectivity, enjoying a well-deserved rest from a lifetime in the medical profession (and raising four children).