

## **FRIENDS FOR LIFE**

by Christine Peets

The call came early one Tuesday morning. Mary's son had suddenly died from a heart attack. There would be a funeral where he had lived, and one in Mary's hometown. It would be a tough 10 days or so, but her classmates would rally as they had done many times before. Some would be able to attend the funeral, while others would call, send cards or flowers, and notes of support. Just as Mary had been there to support her many times, my Aunt Bette would be there to support Mary. When travel is possible, they do. Many years previously, Mary had left her home, travelled to her in-laws home, and then, leaving her then infant son with them, travelled again to be with my aunt at my grandmother's funeral. So now my aunt gladly travelled the 100 miles to see her friend, and stand with Mary as she and her husband buried her son's ashes.

Who is this group of classmates, and how have they stayed connected? They are what I call the group. These women are graduates of the St. Joseph's School of Nursing in Cornwall, Ontario, Canada. They have supported each other through the deaths of parents, siblings, and sadly, children. They have also celebrated marriages, and the births of children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and grandnieces and -nephews.

The St. Joseph School of Nursing started at Hotel Dieu Hospital in Cornwall in 1929 and closed 40 years later. From then until present day, nursing has been taught in the community colleges. By the time the hospital nursing school closed, 578 Registered Nurses had graduated. The first grads were in 1931; the last in 1969. My aunt says that her group, in 1950, was the best because they were in the middle. No doubt, each class thinks theirs is the best. There are, or have been, a few in the group referred to as associates, but they are students or graduates none the less, of the same School of Nursing.

Aunt Bette and her classmates started in 1947, and were capped in January 1948. Until then, they were referred to as probies, as they were on probation. After that, they were called juniors. Now they are all seniors, not in nursing, but in age. What is it about this special group of nurses that they still support each other during the good times and bad? Some in the group are widowed or divorced. Others never married. They live in different parts of the country. Most of them stayed in health care, going on to public health or administration, as well as hospital nursing. In 2005, they will celebrate 55 years since graduation, and the friendship continues. It has outlived some of the graduates themselves, and some of their marriages. Why does it endure, when so many other friendships don't?

It wasn't just one thing; it was everything. Three years of living together in residence while they were doing their nurses' training has bonded these women for life. No one remembers any one event, or series of events, that made the difference. They just knew on graduation that their friendship would not end, and it hasn't.

There was nothing extraordinary, and perhaps nothing other nurses wouldn't understand, but the experiences shared, both sad times and happy times, cemented their friendship. They were closer perhaps than nurses of today, who do not live together in residence as they train. They've laughed about their exploits, and they've cried thinking about patients who died in their care. Some were luckier than others were in that regard, but they all felt the joys and sadness together.

"We became like sisters," my aunt's friend and nursing colleague Lydia once told me. "We came from different places, and we learned to look after, and look out for each other. Our teachers, the nuns, were really quite strict, so we did our best to keep each other out of trouble."

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Lydia, Kay, Pat, Helen, Jackie, Jeanette, Lucy and Mary: these women are a part of my aunt's life, and are her sisters, now that her own sisters have died. Lil, Lorna, and Amelia have died, but the memory of the good times shared with them remains.

Indeed they had come from different places. Only two still live in Cornwall. The others have returned to their hometowns, or have moved to different parts of the country. It is rare they are able to get together, but the connection stays strong through letters, cards, phone calls and, for some, e-mail. They all know that when they are needed, they will be there.

What ties them together is something that even their families don't likely understand, but other nurses will. The life and death situations they've gone through together, that only they understand, helps to form the bond. Knowing what it's like to work hours on end without adequate rest or food may be something that is shared by other workers, but rarely do those other workers hold a life in their hands. Nurses do, and they know they have to be there for each other.

My aunt and her friends are all retired now, many of them having stayed in nursing for their entire careers. They share hospital and public health backgrounds, along with administration and teaching, so they have seen nursing from many sides. They commiserate about the dwindling health care resources, but most of the time their conversations are filled with "everything and nothing" about their day-to-day lives.

They used to gather at Lil's cottage and play Scrabble and cards until the wee hours of the morning. They'll miss those times, but each passing year, there were fewer of them who could make the trip. When they meet for an alumni dinner or some other occasion, it is not to discuss health care, except perhaps their own, as each of them deals with problems related to aging. All of that will be put aside for fun at their reunion in May. There may be some who will come together to celebrate the 95<sup>th</sup> birthday of Sister Elinor McDonald, one of their teachers.

She now lives in a retirement residence for the Religious Hospitallers of St. Joseph, and has become a dear friend of my aunt. The roles have reversed a bit, as it is now the student who cares for the teacher.

There will be more phone calls with sad news, and other sad times as they get older, and their numbers will dwindle. Before that time comes, there will be many more happy times ahead for these nurses. In the end, it is nothing, and it is everything that bonds them together. Those three years gave them their nursing education, but something so much more important. It gave them friends for life.

***Post-script: This story was chosen from 750 entries to be published in "A Cup of Comfort For Nurses", scheduled for publication in 2005, but indefinitely delayed.***