



# Colleagues, friends, family — forever

BACKUS NURSING ALUMNAE CELEBRATE

## 110 years

OF CAMARADERIE

**By Christina Levere**

It's been nine years since the Alumnae Association of the Backus School of Nursing celebrated its 101st anniversary at its annual meeting, but Madelyn Lyman still gets emotional when she recalls the event. The words of David Whitehead, then president and CEO of The William W. Backus Hospital, "touched my heart," and when Dorothy Miller, class of 1942 and then alumnae president, asked the group if they'd rather read or sing the school song, "We all sang," Lyman recalled, "every word."





For Lyman, and so many other nurses in the alumnae association, what's so compelling and bittersweet is the "we" in that memory; it's a sense of camaraderie and inclusion that has spanned lifetimes, and it's still going strong. On Nov. 11, the association celebrates its 110th anniversary.

## Life at school

The William W. Backus School of Nursing opened in 1893 (it closed in 1972). Graduating classes were small, three to 19 students each year, for the three-year program. Roughly 720 nurses graduated from the school; only eight were men. Students dormed there, and so the school became everything to them: study, work, home, family. School was so all-consuming, in fact, that if a student wanted to go home for the weekend, she had to use points.

"We had a point system," said Lyman, who graduated in 1953. "Every month you got 180 points. It cost you 25 points for an overnight."

Lyman used to babysit on weekends for spending money; it cost her five points for every hour after 8 p.m. that she was gone from the school.

"If students had infringements, they were campused," she said, "meaning they couldn't leave school grounds, except for a short walk up around the campus."

The director of nursing lived in an apartment on the first floor, which also included a reception with a television. New students stayed on the top floor, the third floor.

## BACKUS SCHOOL OF NURSING 19th century



Top right: Students would sled down the hill in front of the school, sometimes on bedpans.

"Once," Lyman said, "someone left the water running on the top floor. The water ran down the walls into the reception and ended up in an overhead chandelier. It looked like a fishbowl. The director was not happy."

For new nursing school students, training was rigorous. Lyman spent six months in lectures, on subjects such as chemistry and anatomy, and completed practical work, namely on a doll named Mrs. Chase, an adult-sized mannequin designed specifically for health care students and workers to practice their studies. She also completed three-month training rotations. One was for communicable diseases at Uncas-on-Thames Hospital. (During the hospital's heyday in the 1950s, it housed more than 350 tuberculosis patients a day. The hospital closed in 1995.) Another was for psychiatrics at Norwich State Hospital, which remained operational until 1996. The last was at Yale-New Haven Hospital, for pediatrics training.

When she graduated in 1953, 11 classmates stood alongside her. As she tells it, it's a day that almost didn't come.

"[During my rotation] I was cleaning up in the kitchen at Norwich State Hospital, and I had a small bag of garbage. A patient came by and asked if he could help and without thinking I unlocked the door and let him take it outside. Thankfully he came back. If he hadn't I might not have graduated."

Finding a job fresh out of school wasn't difficult.

"It's not like today," she said. "If you wanted to work somewhere you called them and asked for a job." Her first nursing position was at Uncas-On-Thames, but after six months she got bored — "I passed out pills, that's it!" — so she moved to Backus Hospital, where the director of nursing put her to work in the Emergency Room.

"That's when I found my love," she said. "I'd spent time in pediatrics, but it didn't suit me. Children scared me. They asked too many hard questions. But the ER, that's what I loved. Every day was different. You never knew what was coming through the door. And I worked with a good group of people."



## ALUMNAE ASSOCIATION OF THE BACKUS SCHOOL OF NURSING

*Founded in 1908, the association currently has about 150 members. Ninety are due paying members (membership covers office maintenance, chapel maintenance and banquet dinner of graduates, etc.).*



## A desire to mentor

Fifteen years after the school opened, graduates established the Alumnae Association of the Backus School of Nursing. At the time, its objectives were to cherish and stimulate loyalty for school and hospital; provide financial security for sick members; and to foster interest in the nursing profession and in state and national nursing organizations.

Now 150 members strong, its generous efforts and much-needed mentorship have rippled across the century mark.

A self-described joiner, Lyman said, “As soon as I graduated, I became an alumnae member.” Throughout her life, she’s held in almost every role; right now she’s treasurer. The membership has enabled her to stay connected to classmates and fellow graduates, after what had been such a close relationship in their formative years.

“In the beginning, we didn’t know what school was going to be like, and we were scared. We were just ‘probies’ at the time

[students were on probation for the first six months of school]. But we each had an older student, a big sister who was going to graduate, who from the first day would help us get acclimated, just for the first year. I called my big sister ‘Pinky’ because her last name was Pinkowicz.”

Mary Ellen Warykas, a 1968 nursing school graduate and the current president of the alumnae association, said nursing director Dorothy Miller didn’t have to do much to get her shaking in her boots, but the support system helped her as well.

A typically shy person, she said, “When I was a student, the alumni association did so much for us. There were pizza parties and bowling nights. There was a lot of support for the students.”

Warykas never intended to get into nursing, but her father suggested she attend the Backus School of Nursing, and she was accepted “so I went.” She’s been a nurse at Backus, Lawrence and Memorial Hospital, Day Kimball Hospital and at hospitals in Boston and Florida. Unlike Lyman, who preferred car crashes to children’s curious questions, Warykas spent the majority of her career in pediatric care, special care nurseries and maternity wards.

She retired in 2009.

She noted that even when she wasn’t living in Connecticut, she kept in touch with the association. Once, when she couldn’t make an event, then-president Miller read her I’m-sorry-I-couldn’t-make-it letter aloud. Now president herself, she said that while the association’s efforts may have changed



during its 110-year tenure, her current duties keep her busy.

Because of technology “there are a lot of things the association used to do that we just don’t anymore,” she said. “The association used to run a baby picture service,” but now that everyone has his or her own camera or a cell phone with a camera, that service has become obsolete, particularly in light of today’s heightened security on maternity wards. In 1963, the service was the association’s main source of income.

Lyman added that there used to be a sick fund that gave a monetary gift, usually \$75, to a nurse if she was out sick for more than a week “but that was easier to manage when everyone was a nurse at Backus” and things such as health insurance weren’t so pesky with policies.

Association membership has even started to dwindle, which is why the association transitioned to a 12-member board of directors.

Still, Lyman said, “We’ve adjusted to change.” For instance, the association used to award scholarships to graduating Backus students every year, until the nursing school closed. Today, it honors its mission of continuing education in nursing by giving two scholarships each year to Three Rivers Community College students who pursue the field. The association also supports practicing nurses. Each year, it gives a savings bonds to shift nurses and provides scholarships for nurses to attend national conferences. The association still maintains the Backus Hospital chapel and occasionally donates items such as chairs and bassinets to the maternity ward. They regularly fundraise and contribute hospital campaigns and funds; they gave \$10,000 to the *BackusCare* capital campaign.

There are special acknowledgments and events too, alongside the annual housekeeping, that continue to showcase the association’s commitment to nursing education and giving back. Like the commissioned oil painting portrait of a Backus nurse in her 1893 uniform that they presented to Backus to mark the association’s 75th anniversary. In 1993, seven porcelain dolls dressed in the nurses’ original uniforms, sewn by Dorothy Levanto, a member of the hospital auxiliary, were presented to the hospital to celebrate the hospital’s 100th anniversary.

And the annual banquets, which honor the class celebrating its 50-year anniversary, always draw a crowd, though Lyman isn’t

sure what will happen now that there are only four more classes to honor.

She turns wistfully optimistic, and the scenario of the unknown reminds me of an anecdote she shared. As she told it, after the new students were settled in, and the new and former students had all met, they would do something “spooky.”

“We blindfolded each other and walked around. People had to try to guess what things were. Like a bedpan.”

Faced with the unknown, they were all in it together, and that is how they moved forward.



Left: Dorothy Levanto, who sewed the nursing uniforms for seven porcelain dolls to celebrate Backus hospital’s 100th anniversary, stands next to Dorothy Miller, then president of the alumnae association. Right: The association commissioned an oil painting by George Eisenberg of a Backus nurse in her 1893 uniform; they presented the painting to Backus to mark the association’s 75th anniversary. The portrait is located near the hospital main entrance.



### NURSING SCHOOL SONG

Dear Backus, we revere you,  
As you've helped us many times  
To find the silver lining  
For suffering mankind.  
At the dawn of our tomorrow  
We'll be nurses, staunch and true;  
And when you have a need for us,  
We'll do our best for you.