

College of Nursing Oral History Project  
Thursday, December 15, 2016  
Interview: Nancy Henderson Bliese (NB)  
Interviewer: Donna Miles Curry (DC)

DC: This is the oral history project for the College of Nursing and Health for Wright State University. This is the interviewer, Dr. Donna Miles Curry and today I am interviewing Nancy Bliese. Did I say your name correctly Nancy?

NB: Yes.

DC: So, Nancy, would you be so kind as to introduce yourself.

NB: I am Nancy Bliese. When I went to WSU, it was Nancy Henderson. I have been married since I went to WSU.

DC: So Nancy, give us a little bit about your background, particularly about how you came to be a student at WSU. Feel free to give us some years in there, just to give us a little chronology.

NB: Sure, I am originally from California. My father divorced my mother and moved out to Ohio. I went to a junior college, Mt. San Antonio College, in California and at the end of the two years I was trying to find a nursing school to go to and my father said, "well come to Ohio and I will pay your way through college." That sounded like a good deal, so I went out the fall of 1973 and started going to Akron University. During that first fall semester, I found out that the nursing school was extremely hard to get into as they accepted only 1 out of 4 applicants. My father fell and broke his ankle very severely and we were looking at maybe a school closer to Springfield, Ohio, where he lived. He was recovering from this broken ankle and ended up in the hospital again for numerous things, so we decided in the Spring of 1974 to look for another school. He went ahead and we went all over Ohio and we saw Central State and then we decided to look at Wright State University so we went ahead and got a tour of WSU which was 4 buildings and I said this is wonderful and I said, "Dad the only problem we have - is there is no nursing school here." We didn't have a chance and we really didn't talk to the administration at that time, so we got in the car and was driving back towards Springfield and on the radio, they announced the opening of the WSU School of Nursing.

DC: Oh my gosh.

NB: So he turned his car around in the middle of the freeway and headed right back to WSU. So, I was one of the first applicants in the School of Nursing at WSU. So that is how I came, I transferred from Akron to WSU in the Spring of 1974 and got into the school of nursing in the fall of 1974. So, in the first fall class of the Nursing school.

DC: So did you live at home?

NB: I lived with my father in the apartments.

DC: Sure.

NB: He was diagnosed, in that fall, with cancer. Part of the reason for the broken bone was because it was cancer based fracture. I kept asking him how did you fall? And he said, "well I stepped out of the Cadillac and broke my ankle." Then he said that he sat on the curb and tried to put it back together.

DC: Oh my gosh.

NB. And then he climbed up two flights of stairs and found out that he better call the ambulance at that point. And I said, "so you really never fell" and he said "no," he just stepped out of the Cadillac. Sure enough it was related to - he had Leukemia and lymphosarcoma. So, I started in the school of nursing and one of our courses was following the whole process of death and dying and we got the diagnoses for my dad, actually in May 1974, actually he was diagnosed with Leukemia and Lymphosarcoma and then he died May 14, I'm sorry, it should have been 1974, so I guess he was diagnosed in 1973 and died in 1974 and he was 53 years old.

DC: Oh my gosh. So you were alone in Ohio.

NB: Yes, my brother had come out. He became a lawyer and had started a law firm with my uncle in Springfield, Ohio. I had an uncle and an aunt - actually 2 aunts and uncles in Springfield, Ohio. So actually I had support; but one of my anatomy and physiology partners lived with her grandmother so when my dad died she came up to me and said I want you to come and live with me and my grandmother until you can get back on your feet. So that is what I did and I grieved and I went back home to California for that summer break between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year of nursing school and a lot of people weren't expecting me to return and were surprised when I came back that next year. Because my dad died between midterm and finals, they even said, "well you know Nancy if you don't want to, you don't even have to take the finals." I told them that if I don't take the finals, I will never make it back and I have to go through this. I got a C out of everything but I was glad that I got a C.

DC: Good. Yes.

NB: It was, considering everything that I went through. So I returned back and had another student that I roomed with. I ended up going from one apartment to another during the rest of the years of school, but didn't have a lot of money. My dad had set up a trust fund for me so I had just enough to pay for an apartment and some food and I usually ate one meal a day.

DC: Oh my gosh.

NB: I could do one meal a day. I was very grateful for the Christian group there. We had an IV Christian group – Intersivity Christian fellowship so I would find, in my locker, bags of food for

lunch for me. They would fix lunch for me and put it in my locker so that would give me my second meal of the day.

DC: That is wonderful.

NB: Yes.

DC: A little footnote – we do a foodbank at WSU now for students who are economically challenged in a similar way. So, it is kind of neat to see that, in another way, that something like that was being done then. So now you were gracious enough to share with us your uniform, you sent a picture of you in the uniform.

NB: Yes.

DC: About how soon did you start wearing that uniform and is there a story behind – who picked the uniform, since you were the first class. Do you – can you tell me anything else about the first uniform?

NB: The first uniform was picked for us, but I remember, you know the colors – yellow with the white pinafore that buttoned up the front. (laughing)

DC: Oh wow.

NB: I remember the buttons-that is what I remember the most. Wow we have a lot of buttons here. And I know when we were in clinics, they called us the McDonald girls for the yellow arches. (Laughing.)

DC: That is wild.

NB: Because of the yellow uniform – what I remember the most was designing the hat. Maybe we did design the uniform, but I really can't remember. But I do remember that it was a whole project designing the actual hat.

DC: Oh my gosh – so tell me about that.

NB: We did that on paper so we would work on paper and cut out and fold it together and draw our little lines. We had green and yellow ribbons on the corner of the hat and everybody seemed to be - we all voted for all the different designs and the one we had was the one that I liked the best.

DC: Very good. And you weren't the designer of it? I thought there was a member of your class who was at your reunion who was. Do you remember that?

NB: Well I remember being part of that because I still can put it together because every year at work we have a remembrance of nursing. We have Nursing Day. Right

DC: Right

NB: So I show everybody the hat, so I put it together on the same paper. I cut it out and tape it together and put it on my head.

DC: Excellent. That is so cool. I'm going to have to videotape you and you-tube you on that one of these days.

NB: Sure.

DC: Wouldn't that be cool? That would be great. That is a wonderful story. So now how early – what were your clinical like? What were your courses? What was it like being a student?

NB: I lived and breathed in the library.

DC: Okay

NB: I couldn't afford the books. I was able to get a loan to take care of the tuition after my dad died, so I did that and then I had the money from my dad's trust fund to go through a lot of the schooling there, but I could not afford the books. I think my first year I bought some books, well I think maybe the second year too if I couldn't find it in the library. But usually I lived and breathed at the library. We had an area that had all of the school books in.

DC: Excellent.

NB: So I would go down there and then take it up to the third floor and do my studying. So as soon as the library opened, I was there and I was there until the library closed, studying as much as I could study. I remember staying up late at night working on my care plans and I would think it all up because it was before the computers. I didn't know how to type but I learned when I started at my junior college I learned to type and so I kept on typing away. My roommates would be up at night and be like "are you still typing?" I would say my care plans were due and I have to get it done. There were pages and pages of the care plans.

DC: Right, right. So what was the first setting you remember going to as a nursing student?

NB: The first?

DC: Setting. Like clinical agency.

NB: Greene Memorial Hospital.

DC: Ok

NB: Because we had the tornado that came through there.

DC: Oh my gosh.

NB: And so it was the first year, it was the spring. That is really what I remember the most. I did do some community nursing in Greene County. They chose Greene County for me because it was closer to Springfield. It was straight down the road. All I had to do was go south and I would hit Greene Memorial Hospital. So I was in the clinics and the clinics were Tuesday and Thursday and so I was at the clinic on Tuesday and April 4<sup>th</sup> was my dad's birthday and that's when the tornado hit Xenia. So we even saw all the tornado clouds. We had to celebrate my dad's birthday in the basement of my aunt's house because of all the tornado warnings going out that day. They had a huge amount of tornados all over that area including 6 in Ohio. So, I volunteered in the Civic patrol. Right away I called Donna Dean because I was supposed to go to the hospital on Thursday, right.

DC: Right

NB: The whole town is leveled. I didn't even know if the hospital was still even intact. They asked for volunteers to be part of the civic patrol which included nurses and nursing students. So I said that I'm a nursing student and I'm supposed to have my clinic over there today and they said, okay you can get on the bus. So I got on the bus, and went over to Xenia and they dropped me off at ground zero.

DC: Oh my gosh.

NB: Everything was leveled. I saw, you know, the trees were stripped, the houses were leveled, people were wandering around. So one of my assignments, and I was put together with another nurse from Dayton who lived in Springfield, and so she and I partnered. She said I want you to go ahead and find people, ask their name, ask what their address was if they can remember, and then guide them to the shelter and introduce them. We sent up the tent shelter to gather everybody around. So I would go around and ask people "what is your name" and usually got their first name. Their last name was a little more difficult. And when I asked "what is your address" they would say that they don't know.

DC: Wow.

NB: They said "I know I used to live over there someplace and they couldn't remember their address at all. We were dealing with a lot of people in shock and I would gather them and bring them over to the tent and they would bus them over to the shelter in which they would ask the same questions. I did this all day. The nurse then asked if she could take me home, and I said sure, and she was heading to Dayton and I said no wrong place. I said oh I live in Springfield and she said that's right, so she turned around and took me home. That was my clinical day

with the tornado. We found out that the hospital was still standing. So I reported the next week to the hospital, but it was just amazing.

DC: How, so?

NB: So, I got there in the morning and I was there all day and they counted that as a clinical day for me.

DC: Perfect, were you wearing your uniform during the day? What were you wearing for that?

NB: I wasn't, I was just wearing my clothes and they gave us a vest.

DC: Street clothes. I see.

NB: They gave us a vest. We all wore a vest.

DC: Excellent, an official vest.

NB: So they knew you were part of the Civic Patrol

DC: Excellent. So were the nurses through the American Red Cross? Was that-

NB: The Nurses were part of the Civic Patrol. There was a whole bus load of people who came in with the civic patrol.

DC: Excellent. OK

NB: But she also drove. It must have been that I met her at that Ground Zero Area because she was driving and trying to drive back to Dayton and knew about the Civic Patrol. She may have been part of the Red Cross, I don't know, I can't remember. I do remember that

DC: That is a very phenomenal start.

NB: Yes, it was very vivid to me. That was April 4<sup>th</sup> so April 5<sup>th</sup> was when I went over. After that we knew the hospital was still open so I reported back the following week or maybe it was the second week.

DC: Right.

NB: Because we had to wait for awhile because of the whole disaster. It was very interesting because they found out that their whole disaster plan was based on phone service.

DC: Interesting. So the phones were destroyed.

NB: Like everybody's. So it was the ham radio that actually came into play with that disaster plan.

DC: Interesting.

NB: That is how the Civic Patrol was then developed in Springfield, because all the ham radios were going a mile a minute talking to everybody and finding out what was needed, and what did we need to have happen there. So that is how that developed.

DC: Excellent, this is fascinating. So what was the biggest challenge for you going to school? Was it your finances?

NB: Finances and passing. Getting a passing grade.

DC: So you found the classes challenging then?

NB: The testing was very hard. You know, it was very hard for me to pass the test. For instance we had one midterm and it was based on the disaster, talking about disasters, so we already went through the disaster and we thought okay, we thought that would be easy enough because we were actually basing it on experience; but it actually needed to be based on our book.

DC: Oh, I see. Yeah, yeah.

NB: We did a lot of talking about the how the book was really not reality because we saw reality, so it was hard to work with both information, so when they tested us they tested us according to the book, so I think all of us failed

DC: Oh my gosh. That's amazing.

NB: Our midterms. I think Bobbie Nolan may have gotten a C or a D. She may have been the only one who passed. So we were all upset about that because all we had left was the final.

DC: Sure

NB: So we needed to do well on the final, which we did. So I managed to get a C out of that.

DC: Excellent. Cool. So in what way would you say that your experiences at WSU affected your nursing career?

NB: Oh and we talked about that at the reunion. I was interested in pediatric and I did have my clinical at Barney's Dayton Children's Hospital as well. That is one of my – and that is where I went for my first job, but I also enjoyed community health nursing. I enjoyed going out to the counties. We integrated community health nursing all throughout our years of schooling there

so I enjoyed that, so I was torn. However, the experience of the tornado really – I really enjoyed the emergency experience so even though my first job was at Dayton’s Children Hospital, which was a disaster, and Donna had warned me that it might be a disaster. It was amazing how the teachers knew our personalities and knew what we should go to. I went ahead and my second job after Dayton, I moved to St. Louis because I was getting married, and went to Med Surg and experienced the Med Surg floor and it was a step down really.

DC: Yes.

NB: But I experienced a lot of code emergencies and they liked how I did that on the floor so they pulled me to the emergency room and that is how I started my career as an emergency department nurse.

DC: Excellent

NB: Yes – In Incarnate Word Hospital in St. Louis was wonderful in that they really encouraged me. My confidence was down to 0 and so they really built me up. They said you are a wonderful nurse, you are great especially in the ER. They said you are really good one on one, which is what happened with the tornado – I was one on one. I was right there, I could really relate to everybody, gravitated, and I really loved it and that was the same feeling when I started working in the emergency department – I was one on one and then in the middle of my career, I went from ED to ICU. I enjoyed that too, again, I was one on one, one to two, one to four, that kind of thing but it was the one on one experience that I really enjoyed for the next 35 years. I have been a nurse now for 40 years and I really spent half my years in the emergency department and the other half in ICU and it is mainly based on the experiences of the clinicals that we had at WSU and the experience of that tornado that occurred when I was taking all my pre-nursing courses.

DC: Yes.

NB: and that’s a funny – you know I was at WSU when the tornado formed at WSU and I hadn’t found out there were tunnels at the school.

DC: Right

NB: So I went ahead and ran up to the bookstore just to look around and see what books I was needing more of and trying to figure out how much money I had. And the storm came and there was a break in the storm so I went ahead and ran out and went down to my physiology class. And I essentially got blown into the building. And our classroom was in the basement. Our teacher was a doctor – Ph.D. from WSU and he just lectured through the whole time that the storm was circulating over WSU. We lost power and so we had no lights. This was in the basement with no lights and he continued to lecture.

DC: Wow – was this Andy Kuntzman?

NB: It probably was.

DC: I was just curious.

NB: The name sounds familiar.

DC: I have interviewed two other university professors who were not in nursing proper and I didn't remember. Him and Ira Fritz was the other one that both taught a lot of the nursing students in the early years, but I don't remember what topics exactly. That is amazing. What was the topic? What class was that physiology?

NB: It was part of the anatomy and physiology – it was the physiology part of our anatomy course.

DC: Okay

NB: so when the lights came back on and everything seemed to calm down, he stopped and he said - I don't know how he knew, but he said those who live around here can call home and find out if - you can go ahead and be excused. He eventually stopped the class because he wanted to keep us going through that tornado until he knew that was taken care of. My friends who I stayed with, her father lived in Bellbrook and found out that it had touched down in that area, but out in the country but there wasn't a lot of damage there but then it just continued on to Xenia from there.

DC: So that is amazing – very fascinating. I know we are about at the end of the close of the time you had available today. I want to thank you very much and if possible, we might be able to get a chance to chat again.

NB: Sure.

DC: Okay, thank you very much.