

Interview with Margaret Cookson
June 2010

The first new nursing home in Washington State to be opened and operated by a nurse was right here in Mount Vernon! Margaret Cookson, RN with the help and support of her family opened Rest Haven in 1951 at Fir and 8th Streets. This was a huge undertaking and she hasn't slowed down much over the years. Margaret recently shared her experiences and philosophies of nursing with us.

Q

What inspired you to open Rest Haven?

A

First of all there was a real need. In the late 1940s, nursing homes were operated by ladies who had worked with doctors or in hospitals and had nursing experience. Other "homes" operated by the county were called County Farms. Old Folks Home was another term used when non-family members were cared for by lay people. There were no regulations from the state, no licensing requirements, no established levels of care, no requirements related to nursing or medications. Ironically about this time my father asked me what I wanted to do if I had the financial resources. I said, open a nursing home.

Q

How did you begin?

A

In 1950 there was a fire in a care home in Hoquiam. This event pushed the State Health Department to develop rules and regulations licensing all facilities housing more than two unrelated people. I began researching all the new rules related to care. My father who was retired went to Olympia to investigate the building regulations. Convinced we could meet all the requirements we started looking for a location. We found property at 8th and Fir and open Rest Haven Nursing Home in December 1951.

Q

Where did the name Rest Haven come from?

A

I was born at a Maternity Home in Mount Vernon called Rest Haven. My mother used to tell the story of my birth, 'It was a dark and stormy night. During birth the lights went out and dad had to hold a candle so Dr. Boynton could see what was happening.' Well we know how the story ended and I thought it would be a nice tribute to use the name Rest Haven again. Later I learned there was another nursing home in the state with the same name, so I wasn't unhappy the name changed when we sold.

Q

This sounds like a real family project.

A

My father and husband were in charge of the construction. When we opened everyone had a job. My husband was in charge of maintenance. Dad was responsible for the finances. For the first three years mom cooked. We didn't have recipes for 'groups of people' so we had to make up our own recipes and adapted our favorite recipes for 50+ people. No small task. Much to mom's delight we finally hired a cook. My husband and I along with our three children lived right next door.

Q

How many patients did you serve?

A

Originally we served 27 patients – we grew to 57.

Q

Where did patients come from?

A

Physicians would call and say they had patients for us. We received calls locally from Skagit and Island counties and from as far away as Seattle including Children's Hospital.

Q

What type of patients did you serve?

A

Most were short-stay. Some were long-term and others were terminal, what we would today call hospice patients. At that time cancer patients had very limited treatment options. I still remember one child with cancer who stole my heart with his sweet personality.

Q

You must have had to hire more staff as your patient population grew?

A

Yes. We hired a night nurse, Millie Markus, she's still in Mount Vernon. Then we hired a nurse for the 3:00-11:00pm shift, a relief nurse and nurses' aids. We had RN coverage 24/7.

Q

Did you train all the nursing staff members?

A

Yes. I developed a curriculum for our staff focusing on transferring classroom knowledge to bedside care and stressing personal caring.

Q

Sounds like you had a specific nursing philosophy.

A

Yes. I've always felt strongly that nursing is a personal caring profession. It's one thing to go to school and acquire the classroom and book knowledge to complete tasks like taking blood pressures or dispensing medications. It's quite another thing to be able to connect with and serve people in a manner that communicates caring.

Q

Can you give some examples?

A

Patients have emotional needs as well as medical needs. They can use more than the next pill or the latest high tech gadget. They need compassionate conversation. They truly benefit from the little things like a fluffed pillow; an encouraging touch; a good ear to listen; a wink; a smile. These simple things promote healing and comfort. I believed this was true back in 1951 and is still true today.

Although Rest Haven changed owners and names over the years Margaret's philosophy of nursing lives on at Mira Vista Care Center today.

Margaret has carried her nursing philosophy with her over the years. She served as the Executive Director of the Hawaii Nurses Association and the Director of Nursing of a 150-bed nursing home in Hawaii. Upon returning to Mount Vernon she worked as an RN at Skagit Valley Hospital and then for Visiting Nurses. She retired from nursing in 1997 and opened a house and dog sitting business. "I treat the homes and animals as I treated my patients with loving care." And she still has time to hike with friends.