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Remarkable Women of UNMC: Dr. Helen Starke

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Helen Starke joined the UNMC faculty as an assistant professor in July 1969. This was before the *Division* of Cardiovascular Medicine was formally established in 1972. She was designated principal electrocardiographer and placed in direct charge of the cardiac elective with administrative responsibility for phonocardiography, vectorcardiography, and exercise testing. Although she joined a team of only two other full time cardiology faculty members, she helped to legitimize the specialty and grow the division. She took pleasure running the inpatient cardiology service and was reluctant to let her colleagues do morning rounds. In 1975, she was promoted to the rank of associate professor. Dr. Starke's fellowship training emphasized physiology and focused on congenital heart disease as well as adult cardiology. Former colleagues remember her as a doctor with an encyclopedic knowledge of cardiac physiology. She was an expert on the natural history of untreated valvular and congenital heart disease, and a master at EKG interpretation.

Dr. Starke was a friend of Helen Taussig, known as the founder of pediatric cardiology. She also knew Alfred Blalock who, as chief of cardiology at Johns Hopkins, collaborated with Dr. Taussig to develop the Blalock-Thomas-Taussig shunt to treat children with the blue baby syndrome.

Colleagues remember Dr. Starke as an excellent teacher. She maintained a cadre of patients who she would call upon to demonstrate various physical findings for students and house officers. She published articles on a wide variety of topics including echocardiography,

electrocardiography, hypertension, and exercise stress testing during her time at UNMC. She was a recipient of the Distinguished Teacher Award from the College of Medicine and a Citation for Meritorious Service award. She also received education awards from the National University of Continuing Education Association and the Council on Clinical Cardiology.

Those who knew her, remember Dr. Starke as a quiet woman, but also remark that she was fervently anti-communist and anti-socialist. Colleagues also remember Dr. Starke's smoking habit. Smoking used to be permitted in the hallways at University Hospital and she always carried a cigarette in her hand during rounds. Before entering a room, she would extinguish her cigarette in an ashtray on the chart rack, or crush it on the sole of her shoe or the hallway floor. The cigarette butts would sometimes leave a smoke trail after she put them in her pocket. When asked how she could counsel patients to quit smoking, she would reply that smoking was her only sin in the world and that she enjoyed it.

Some of the most noteworthy aspects of Dr. Starke's life occurred before she came to Omaha. She was born on January 2, 1918 in the Bronx. She grew up listening to classical music and reading with her father, Edward Starke, a businessman. Her mother, the former Maud Keating, was a homemaker. She had a younger brother who was a bomb disposal expert in the Navy during World War II, and later became a chemical engineer.

Dr. Starke attended high school in New York City and then in Ridgewood, New Jersey, where she participated in the French Club, Tennis Club, and Gym Exhibition. Her yearbook



Helen Starke's graduation photo from the 1934 Ridgewood High School *Arrow* yearbook

message was, "Mathematics was her pastime." After high school, she graduated from Duke University in 1938 with a bachelor's degree in mathematics, and was a member of Pi Mu Epsilon national honorary mathematics society.



1934 Ridgewood High School tennis team (Dr. Starke is in the middle row on the left)

After college, she entered Duke University Medical School and graduated in 1942. There was only one other woman in her admitting class of 69 students and her acceptance was even more remarkable at that time, since she did not have a pre-medical background. She was inducted into Alpha Omega Alpha honorary medical society that year, the same year she was hospitalized for two weeks with thrombocytopenic purpura.

After medical school graduation, she was an Intern in Internal Medicine at Duke Hospital for one year and then an Assistant Resident in Internal Medicine at Strong Memorial Hospital, at the University of Rochester in Rochester, N.Y. for another year. After that, she returned to Duke where she was a Fellow in Internal

After medical school graduation, she



Portion of the photo from Dr. Starke's 1938 Duke University Medical School Class of 69 students

Medicine for one year. She was an Instructor in Medicine at Duke until 1948 and then an Associate in Medicine between 1948 and 1953.

During this time, there were few effective drugs for severe hypertension. She became acquainted with Dr. Walter Kempner, who developed the rice diet, thought to be the grandfather of other programs like the Pritikin and Ornish diets. She published her first articles on

the effects of the rice diet in malignant hypertension and hypertensive vascular disease while at Duke. Dr. Starke admired Dr. Kempner, who wrote a reference letter for her years later. The rice diet contained little or no sodium and she remained a believer in the value of a low sodium diet to treat heart failure. Former colleagues remember how she insisted on strict compliance from her patients.

While she was at Duke, Dr. Starke's life took an unexpected change in direction. Although she had joined the Presbyterian Church at the age of 12, she considered herself an agnostic. She became acquainted with at least three members of the Catholic clergy and began studying their faith while she was in North Carolina. She found this, "...a unique opportunity for me to understand some of the many questions I had been pondering for a long time." On the night of June 29, 1950 during a period of what we would probably now call burnout, "in a flash, her fatigue

and discomfort left her,” according to an obituary. She later discovered that June 29, is the date of the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, which honors their martyrdom. Dr. Starke was baptized on November 11, 1950 and began a period of deeper religious study along with a desire to serve the Church.

This led to a startling decision by Dr. Starke to pause her medical career and join the Foreign Mission Sisters of St. Dominic, now known as the Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic, on February 1, 1953 when she was 35 years old. At that time, women who entered Maryknoll were usually between the ages of 16 and 30.

Maryknoll, headquartered in Ossining, New York, was founded in 1912, by Mary Josephine Rogers, known as Mother Mary Joseph. The Maryknolls have a long-standing multicultural composition and a history of missionary work in Asia. On April 11, 1955 Mother Mary Columba Tarpey, a Maryknoll, was on the cover of Time Magazine. During World War II, members of the order were imprisoned in Asia, and others volunteered to accompany Japanese-Americans who were sent to internment camps. Maryknoll nuns were imprisoned and tortured after the communist takeover in China in 1949. This may have been the reason for some of Dr. Starke’s strident views on communism. In 1980, two Maryknoll sisters engaged in missionary work were raped and murdered by members of the El Salvador National Guard. After World War II, missionary work expanded to Latin America, Africa, and the Pacific Islands.

Dr. Starke entered the order in Valley Park, Missouri as a postulant after providing \$100 as a dowry. After six months, she became a novice and chose the name of Sister Paula Therese Starke, after Paul the Apostle, because of his drive and determinism. During this time, she would

have awakened at 5:15 a.m. for meditation and Mass at 6:25 a.m. Novitiates had regimented schedule that included several periods of prayer and meditation throughout the day as well as duties in the kitchen and laundry. She would have studied Catholic doctrine and essentials of



Sister Paula Therese Starke M.M.

religious life. She took her initial vows at Valley Park, on September 8, 1955 and her final vows exactly six years later. After her initial vows, she returned to New York and spent time with Mother Mary Joseph prior to her death in October 1955. Sister Paula began the next chapter in her career when she was assigned to Queen of the World Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri.

Health care was largely segregated in Kansas City in the early part of the last century and care was substandard for Blacks, who composed approximately 10 percent of the population. A new City Hospital (General Hospital no. 1) opened for the White population in 1908, while an older hospital, built in 1873, was left for Black and Mexican patients. This “old City Hospital,” was later called General Hospital no. 2. The majority of the staff was also Black, and in 1914, this hospital, along with a nursing school, became the first municipal hospital completely managed by African Americans. The building was in poor condition and a new state-of-the-art Kansas City General Hospital no. 2

opened on March 2, 1930. A Kansas City Newspaper article included the following description: “The only City Hospital in the U.S.A. ministering exclusively to colored people and completely officered by a colored staff is General Hospital No. 2 of Kansas City, Missouri.” Not counting Blacks employed by the Department of Education, the hospital employed 95% of professional and semi-professional Blacks working for the Municipal Government.

Nevertheless, before long K.C. General Hospital no. 2 began to suffer from a lack of supplies, equipment, and trained staff in addition to a deteriorating physical condition. These conditions led to a work slowdown by staff physicians and interns in 1947. Health care remained segregated in Kansas City, and it was not until 1957 that Hospitals no. 1 and no. 2 consolidated. As late as 1962, there were no Black physicians at St. Luke’s, Trinity Lutheran, Research, or Baptist Hospital in Kansas City. Menorah Medical Center and Kansas University Medical Center were less segregated.

This was the situation when Sister Paula Therese came to work at Queen of the World Hospital in 1956, the first fully integrated public hospital in the city. The hospital opened on May 22, 1955 largely through the efforts of Kansas City Archbishop Edwin



Queen of the World Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri

O’Hara who said in 1952, “I am not interested in a Negro Hospital. I will suggest that the hospital open its doors to all persons regardless of race, color, or creed.” The 92-bed hospital building

opened in the former St. Vincent's Maternity Hospital, after a complete renovation during 1954 and 1955. Former President, Harry Truman, was the principal speaker at the dedication. St. Vincent's Hospital had opened in 1909, and was desegregated in 1951 when two Black physicians joined the staff. It was the first maternity hospital in Kansas City and served all regardless of race, color, or faith.

Maryknoll sisters operated Queen of the World Hospital as part of their medical mission. At the door of the hospital, hung the motto: "These doors are ever open to all the afflicted regardless of race, color or creed." Nuns occupied a variety of positions including physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and technicians. The hospital, called the "Miniature Lourdes" by some, opened as a non-sectarian pilot project with an integrated hospital staff, medical staff, and patient population. Later, a school of practical nursing opened there.

When she arrived at Queen of the World, Sister Paula was one of 13 Maryknoll sister-doctors working in various parts of the world. Some were specialists such as surgeons and



Dr. Starke with patients at Queen of the World Hospital

anesthesiologists. The administrator was Sister Mary Mercy, who had been the first Maryknoll sister-doctor. Sister Mercy had been in Korea, but was ordered off the peninsula when fighting erupted in 1950. She was allowed to come back to work with refugees at the personal request of General MacArthur in 1951. The 1957 book, *Her Name is Mercy*, chronicled her work.

While at Queen of the World, Sister Paula's day began with Mass and meditation. In 1958, there were 23 nuns and lay staff including nurses, social workers, pharmacists, lab and x-ray technicians, and dieticians. A nursing supervisor, the administrator, a sister M.D., and one other sister visited every patient in the hospital daily and Sister Paula knew each patient. She was in charge of the educational program and she functioned as a "general house officer" when other staff were not present. She said, "I try to keep an eye on the sickest patients; I take care of emergencies; and I try to make myself useful to the doctors on the staff." Dr. J. F. O'Malley, a staff physician described Sister Paula Therese as an eminently well-qualified internist and an excellent scientist, as well as "a fine religious." While at Queen of the World, Sister Paula also worked with Sister Madeline Dorsey, who participated in the Selma-to-Montgomery March in 1965, and who later helped to identify the bodies of the Maryknoll nuns killed in El Salvador.



Dr. Starke at Queen of the World Hospital

During this period, Sister Paula had a Lancet publication under the name of Helen Starke. Hospital diaries note an epidemic of flu and colds in 1957 and mention Sister Paula Therese's "Cold Clinic." Records also mention a pregnant patient with a severe cardiac condition who gave birth to premature

twin boys. Sister Paula Therese “spent most of the day with her, until most of the danger passed.” She also did a research project on “Anemia in Negro Women.”

The experiment at Queen of the World Hospital was a success. By the 1960’s, all area hospitals opened to Black patients and Black Physicians. Admissions at Queen of the World declined and the Maryknolls could no longer support the hospital. The hospital doors were closed on December 31, 1965.

Sister Paula remained on the active medical staff at Queen of the World until 1964. While she was in Kansas City, she developed an interest in cardiology and was able to attend local cardiology seminars and do some clinical training at the University of Kansas. In 1964, Mother Mary Coleman in New York discussed the possibility of her going to Hong Kong, but Sister Paula suggested instead a career in academic medicine because she felt she had no aptitude for learning a foreign language, especially Cantonese. This led to a 6-month position as an Instructor in Medicine at Bellevue Hospital in New York. Dr. Starke stated that she was looking for deep personal involvement in an active medical program where useful service and intellectual growth go hand in hand. She noted the “beautiful spirit” and the “keen interest in the individual patient” that existed there, something that characterized her philosophy throughout her career.

In July 1965, she began a 3-year cardiology fellowship at the University of Kansas, which also included a 1-year post-doctoral fellowship in physiology. Her long-term goals in her fellowship application read, “Ultimately I should like to participate in the field of internal medicine preferably exclusively in cardiology – or at least with emphasis in cardiology – in an academic environment. This includes some share in teaching students and house staff as well as

a research program.” She wore her habit during her fellowship training, and it is notable that her fellowship application asked whether she is pregnant and whether a change in marital status is contemplated. After fellowship, she was accepted for a non-tenured position as Instructor in Medicine in the Cardiology Department at Kansas in 1968, at a salary of \$8000 per year.

She came to Nebraska after one year at Kansas. Dr. Starke’s colleagues remember her as the smartest person in the room, but her greatest legacy was the love she showed her patients and the love they returned to her. She is remembered as a wonderful human being who dedicated her life to medicine. Colleagues remember how she refused to speak to patients in a condescending manner. Instead, she would continue to answer questions until they understood. Her Maryknoll obituary relates how she emphasized the importance of respect and concern for the patient as a person, when she spoke to students.

Dr. Starke donated half her salary to Maryknoll. This led to more than one IRS audit, which were a frequent source of irritation. She lived austerely, in an apartment near 40th St. and Hamilton, although she allowed herself the luxury of an overseas trip every year with a friend. She also enjoyed traveling to Jackson Hole, Wyoming each year to the cardiology conference hosted by UNMC. Colleagues remember her old car with rusting floorboards that a nearby body shop would repair without charge. Dr. Starke enjoyed traveling to Houston over holidays to spend time with her brother’s family. She adored her great-nephews and one of them still has the teddy bear that Aunt Helen gave him 35 years ago.

The final phase of Dr. Starke's career began after she retired from UNMC at the age of 70. She moved to Houston after considering positions in a number of foreign countries. The move also allowed her to spend time with her nephew and his family. She studied for two months to take her Texas medical boards and then practiced general internal medicine in a clinic associated with the Ripley House Community Center located near the turning basin in Houston's east end. A relative of Dr. Starke described the neighborhood as the "red-light district" and one that was



Dr. Starke's headstone at the Maryknoll Sisters Congregation Cemetery in Ossing, New York

"rough and full of sailors." Dr. Starke said that the clinic reminded her of Queen of the World. She continued to do missionary work in Mexico after her move to Texas, and practiced in villages without running water. She moved back to New York in 1994, after a diagnosis of esophageal cancer, and she lived

in Residential Care at the Maryknoll motherhouse until her death on July 11, 1995. Her most faithful visitors were sisters who had been with her at Queen of the World Hospital.

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