

Michigan Journal of Public Health

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 3

2014

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Julie Gleason-Comstock

Wayne State University, jgleason@med.wayne.edu

Steven C. Gold

Macomb County Department of Health and Community Services

Greg Cline

Grand Valley State University, clinegr@gvsu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Gleason-Comstock, Julie; Gold, Steven C.; and Cline, Greg (2014) "Public Health Heart and Soul: Jean Ellet Chabut, BSN, MPH (1942-2014)," *Michigan Journal of Public Health*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mjph/vol7/iss1/3>

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Public Health Heart and Soul: Jean Ellen Chabut, BSN, MPH (1942-2014)

Reflections from

Julie Gleason-Comstock, PhD, MCHES, Steven C. Gold, MPH, Greg Cline, PhD

Julie Gleason-Comstock

If you worked in public health in Michigan in the last four decades, you were likely – and lucky – to have met - and to know - Jean Chabut. While I can only speak for the last two decades, the first time I “saw” Jean was in 1989 in a Detroit Health Department Conference Room picture of 1960’s public health nurses – the heart and soul of public health. When I returned to the Michigan Department of Public Health (MDCH) Special Office on AIDS Prevention (aka SOAP) the next day, my boss, Randy Pope, assured me the Deputy Director was the same Jean – with the same spirit. Jean had the ability to weave herself into the rich fabric of Michigan public health. You could see her at a Conference in Grand Rapids rallying the Michigan Public Health Association, or sit across the table from her as she chaired the Prevention Research Council in Okemos, and know she would fight for the best in public health, and challenge and encourage anyone in the room (or out of the room, for that matter).

An interview with Jean by Dr. Richard Douglass, *MJPH* Editorial Board member and Emeritus Eastern Michigan University Faculty provided a window illustrating the clarity of her public health vision. When asked about initiatives that could stimulate community-based participatory research, a topic of interest to the *Journal*, Jean suggested “Community Health Hubs” that could do for adult health and geriatrics what traditional primary care and family

medicine had done for pediatrics and child health. This would include the use of local “indigenous” Community Care Case Workers who would focus on chronic disease management. Overcoming barriers to making this effort a “billable service” would be a challenge to health services management, an important epidemiologic research question, and would extend a viable continuum of public health services from childhood up to the elderly.

It is with the greatest respect we celebrate Jean’s pragmatic life in public health, and it is incumbent upon us to focus our vision as new challenges arise. A number of *Michigan Journal of Public Health* Editorial Board members, including myself, considered Jean a mentor as well as a public health leader. Those thoughts follow from Steve Gold, MPH, Director of the Macomb County Department of Health and Community Services, and Greg Cline, PhD, Assistant Professor of Public and Health Administration at Grand Valley State University.

Steve Gold

My first encounter with Jean Chabut was in the early 1980’s - a time of significant organizational change for public health in Southeast Michigan. In those years I occupied my first administrative position - Director of Nutrition Services for the MIC-PRESCAD Project. MIC-PRESCAD was a categorical, Federally-funded project providing “Maternal & Infant Care - Preschool, School-age, and Adolescent Health Care” to thousands of low-income women and children each year in Detroit and Wayne County. The effects of President Reagan’s M&CH Block Grant initiative - funding reductions, for the most part - were beginning to be felt, and the freestanding categoricals were shrinking or disappearing.

MIC-PRESCAD’s assets (including its administrative staff) were to be divided between the Detroit and Wayne County health departments, and Jean represented DHD at a meeting I

attended to work on who would be responsible for what. Although I was the most junior person at the table, I remember challenging Jean, insisting that she tell me whether or not the detailed program objectives written by MIC-PRESCAD staff would be adopted and carried forward by Detroit when they took over the city-side facilities.

Only a few years my senior in age, Jean was vastly my superior in experience. She turned to look me in the eyes, smiled in a way that had little to do with humor, and said “Well Steve, I guess you’ll be informed about that when and if you need to know.” In a second my balloon of self-importance was popped, and I saw that I had seriously misunderstood my place in the scheme of things. Much later in our relationship I had occasion to remind her of that first meeting, and to apologize for the rudeness of my younger self. Jean dismissed what I remembered as a terrible faux pas graciously, telling me that she tried not be distracted by petty matters when there was real work to be done. This was a lesson I saw Jean Chabut demonstrate more than once in the thirty years I was privileged to know her. Her life in public health was indeed a pragmatic one, explaining in part why she was always such an effective leader.

Greg Cline

Unlike the others, I don’t recall when I first met Jean. My guess it was a brief encounter sometime in the mid 90s when I was an entry level research associate at the Michigan Public Health Institute (MPHI) . What I remember about Jean, though, is that she treated everyone in public health with great warmth and kindness regardless of level or assigned tasks. Her memory was stunning, early on I realized she never forgot my name (or others’) and always greeted me with a warm smile and hearty hello. She was always the expert, always the lead, but also always engaging all those around her in whatever work with which she was focused.

As time went by and I found myself more often in Jean's presence – normally participation on some project Steering Committee – what struck me was how it was her humanity that lit up rooms and by which she led so many of us so well. This I am sure was what makes us all miss her so. Despite her depth and breadth of knowledge, decades of experience and administrative acumen – what made us want to work was her warm, caring magnetism.