

REHABILITATION PIONEERS



The first class of physical therapists to graduate from the University of Alberta

What am I going to be when I grow up?

As a child, I loved my swimming and dancing lessons and then beginning in Junior High I became a Junior Leader at the YWCA, helping to teach swimming, dancing and gym classes. In the summer after grade 11 and again after grade 12, I attended a provincial

government-sponsored Recreation Leadership School in Red Deer where young people from all over the province were taught skills in physical activities and sports as well as leadership skills for 6 glorious weeks. We slept in dorms and ate in a common cafeteria and we were on the go from 9am to 9pm. After supper we'd gather in the auditorium and each of us took a turn at leading a sing-song and participating in a skit or two to entertain everyone else. We were expected to put our new skills to use back at home. I did, at the Y and for the city department of recreation, teaching swimming, dancing and gymnastics. Other high school students worked in retail on Saturdays to earn spending money. This recreation work, which I loved, was my way of doing the same.

I graduated from high school at 17, in 1952. I had a yen to travel and when I heard about the young people who came from Europe to work in Banff and Jasper, I longed to have such an adventure. My parents, I'm sure, thought that was too bold for a 17 year old, so in September, 1952, I went to England to live with an aunt and uncle whom I had never met. My uncle was a house master at a private boys' school and my aunt was the housekeeper. She had organized a small nursery school, children of other school masters and their wives, for me to run every morning. There were 7 children and their parents paid me. In the afternoons I was my aunt's helper. One term my job was to wash the boys' underwear and socks, using a wringer washing machine, of course! I had saved money from my recreation job to pay for a one-way ticket to England so I had to save enough to pay for the homebound passage on a ship and the train journey across Canada.

I stayed in England a year and when I returned to Edmonton I did the same kind of recreation work again, plus I was an assistant at a couple of community playschools. This was before kindergarten was provided in Edmonton schools and a playschool taught children with social skills, crafts and games. I gave my mother 1/3 of my wages, about \$40, to pay for my room and board. At the Y, I came up against a dictatorial administrator and it became clear to me that if I was going to continue in this field and be able to make decisions affecting my work and the work of others, I would have to get more education. Research revealed that the only place offering a degree in Recreation Administration was the University of Western Ontario in London. There wasn't even a Physical Education degree program offered at the University of Alberta. In any case, athletics was not my strength. Going away to university was financially impossible for me and my family. My parents said if I could find something I wanted to study at the U of A, I could live at home rent free and then we could manage the fees.

So I began to cast about – what shall I do? “Why don't you be a teacher? You'd be a good one”, was something I heard from many quarters. My father wrote me a letter saying that if I thought I was going to be a wife and mother someday then perhaps I should just get a job, any job, and do the things I love as my hobby and recreation. If however, he went on to say, you think you are going to be a career woman then you need to think seriously about it and find work that you love. It was unusual for him to suggest I might be a career woman, given the times but the idea of combining work and

career didn't occur to him or to me. It was 1954 and I had been out of school for two years so I was now 19. An education degree takes four years to complete. The 50s culture suggested that women should be married by 21, at the latest. I thought to myself, "If I do an education degree I will be 23 when I graduate. Too old, too old!"

My father worked for the Federal Government and I was considering writing the government exam to get myself a job, any job, when my mother read an article in the Edmonton Journal that changed my life. It explained that a new School of Physiotherapy was opening at the U of A in September and invited interested young women to apply. She had cut it out for us to read together and that night I decided that we should at least send for the information. When it came, my parents and I sat down to read it with a dictionary in hand because there were several courses of study that were mysteries to us. What is electrotherapy, for heaven's sake? What's the difference between physiology and pathology? And why do we have to take physics? One barrier for me was that it was hospital work. I had a considerable fear of hospitals because of a couple of unpleasant and scary incidents in my childhood. However, I reasoned, it was a physical job, not sitting at a desk and it was working with people, aspects that were important to me. I also reasoned that by the time someone needed physiotherapy they weren't too sick anymore, reducing the scary part of hospitals to a smaller concern. And hallelujah! It was a two year diploma program! I applied and was accepted.

University days

The first day of classes I presented myself at the Quonset hut which was to be the home of the new School of Physiotherapy, behind the university residences, Assiniboia and Athabasca Halls. I was met by Nancy Rendell, a wiry, businesslike, older Canadian woman who had just completed her Physiotherapy Teacher's Training in England and had come to be the instructor for every one of our physiotherapy courses. "Good morning, Miss Hirst", was her greeting and Miss Hirst is what she called me until the end of our two year program. We all got used to being spoken to formally like that but for many of us it was a first. We were introduced to Dr. Fowler, the director of the school who told us he had high expectations for us and for the school. There had been a polio epidemic in 1952 which highlighted the acute shortage of qualified therapists in Alberta. It was the primary incentive to open the school and he was excited to see so many young women who would enter the workforce in two short years.

There were 17 of us that morning:

Shirley Allin
Aline Baril
Shirley Dominy
Berniece Donais
Sue Fife
Barb Garrett
Helen Hays

Elaine Hirst
Lynn Houston
Bev Lee
Marianne Lindsay
Mona McLaughlin
Rosemary Mielke
Dorothea Moreau
Margot Parker
Esther Williams
Donna Wood

Many of us had been out of school for at least one year but some came straight from high school. I recognized one of the others. Mona had been at the Red Deer Leadership School. One young woman left the class at the end of the first year to marry and another after completing the first year, left to become Dr. Fowler's secretary. She became an honorary member of the class. 15 of us went on to graduate.

Three of us applied for and received \$50 bursaries from the Canadian Legion. Fees for the year were \$250 so it was a reasonably generous bursary.

Classes began at 8am and we had 37 hours a week of classwork and labs. Then there was the homework and the struggles to understand medical terminology which was totally foreign to me. Courses like anatomy, physiology, pathology, psychology and physics were taught by professors in their respective departments. The profs were all men. Miss Rendell accompanied us to all our classes so she would know what we were being taught and I expect to give some direction to the professor if she thought we were getting either too much or too little information. We didn't like that but.....

The anatomy professors were wonderful. They had never taught anatomy to women before. There were no women in medicine or dentistry in 1954. We, and they, were pioneers. They began gently, with skeletons and bones, clean, dry and odor-free. The day we "did shoulders" was memorable. We had studied shoulders in the text; the bones, the muscles, the nerves and blood supply so we knew where they were in relation to each other. Or at least we knew where they were supposed to be. Sometimes, as we found out, they aren't where they belong. There are many anomalies in the human anatomy. "Okay, today we're going down to the lab", said Dr. Rawlins. Sounded harmless enough. In the lab, trays of shoulders were brought out, in varying states of disrepair. Some with scapulas attached and some attached to clavicles. All of them with muscles attached. They were not clean, dry and odor-free. "Not me", I say to myself, "you're not going to get me to touch those things." But, you know, by the time 20 minutes had gone by, I was right in there finding the insertion of a muscle or the nerve supply that runs beneath the tendon and other equally fascinating things. We eventually moved on to the cadaver lab. We used the same specimens as the medical students, and they did the actual dissecting, wrapping the cadaver again when they

were finished for the day. Then we would have to unwrap it and examine the particular parts we were studying. The med students and we were following the same course of study. They were just ahead of us. The formaldehyde smelled just awful and although I never got used to it, I learned to bear it.

Massage class was another place where we began gently. We learned the strokes – effleurage, wringing, kneading - and began practising them on each other's arms. Arms are safe. You don't have to take any clothes off to massage arms. Backs and legs are different and require different degrees of undress. They came next when we were much more familiar with each other. When we were on to legs, I remember the jokes about "wringing the buttocks". That was another thing I said I wasn't going to do, but, of course, I did. Because of my recreation background where I was accustomed to changing rooms with little privacy, I was not uncomfortable with the undressing part of massage class.

In the summer, between the two years, we were assigned to internships in hospitals, the Worker's Compensation Board Rehabilitation Clinic, the Cerebral Palsy Clinic and the mobile clinic of the Canadian Arthritis Society, where we worked under the supervision of qualified therapists. Some of us went to Calgary for our internships. We even got paid for this, \$50 a month. We were required to keep a log of the kinds of patients we saw and the kinds of treatments we administered, mostly for our own use so we could monitor and ask for what we needed. We were terrified at the prospect of treating real patients and I imagine the therapists were reluctant to give us much responsibility also. Many of the therapists were from England and some were from Central Canada where there were training courses at the University of Toronto and McGill University in Montreal. We learned to chart our activities and the therapists had to co-sign our reports, of course.

In year two, Nancy Rendell got some help. Moyna Gordon arrived from England and she took over some of the teaching, necessary because a second year of students arrived also. Moyna specialized in teaching treatments for patients with respiratory conditions, and post-operative treatments, (these folks are still quite ill and it was not my favourite rotation). She also taught about a new electrotherapy modality, ultra sound, and a radically new treatment for neurological conditions, PNF, Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitation.

A second summer of internships followed. Immediately following the completion of a second successful internship, Nancy began to call me Elaine instead of Miss Hirst, except if we were at the workplace. I got it. We were now colleagues.

We convoked from the University of Alberta in November. The ceremony took place in Convocation Hall in the Arts Building along with graduating students from other schools and faculties. We also had our own private dinner with the Dean of Medicine and I received the first physiotherapy book prize for good marks. Dr. Fowler, Nancy Rendell

and Moyna Gordon were all there bursting with pride at our accomplishments and their own.

After Graduation

Some of us began to work immediately, 6 of us at the University of Alberta Hospital. We were enthusiastic and irreverent, and the department, under the supervision of Mr. Jim Littlefair, rocked! But we were good therapists too and took on our share of responsibility. My registration number at the Association of Physical Therapists of Alberta was #49. My first monthly paycheque was \$125. If I chose to eat in the hospital cafeteria, they kept \$25 so I took my lunch!

During coffee breaks at the hospital, conversation often turned to current events. The birth control pill has been invented and my co-workers were divided in their opinions. Some were Roman Catholic and some were not, but there were animated discussions about the pros and cons, about using the pill to control irregular menstruation as well as for contraception. It was still illegal in Alberta to buy contraceptive devices like the diaphragm and condoms in a drug store. It was 1969 before that was legalized. The other hot topic was "mixed drinking". We were still at the stage in this province where hotels could have two beverage rooms, one for men and one for "ladies and escorts", but only beer and soft drinks were sold. You had to remain seated and there was no moving around from table to table. No spirits were served. The proposal was that there be bars where all manner of drinks would be served and that restaurants would also serve wine and other alcoholic beverages. Will there be more or less drunkenness and bad behaviour? Arguments flew on both sides.

I married in November 1956, in the same month as our graduation ceremony although I had been working since August. In the next few years, many of us married and had children. Once pregnant, a woman was expected to stop working outside the home, at least when she began to "show". One of us, Aline, was a pioneer in balancing work and mothering, working late into her pregnancies and taking off only 3 months with each of their 3 children. Some of us always worked, some went back to work years later, some didn't, some went to school, and some didn't. I was one who did some holiday relief and part time teaching of pre-natal classes while at home with my two children, born in 1960 and 1961. I went back to full-time work after ten years, then back to school to complete my Physical Therapy degree and then continued to work for another 22 years. The people who told me I would be a good teacher were right. Physical therapists spend much of their treatment time teaching, and the same skills that would have made me a good teacher contributed to my success as a therapist.

We had a 10 year reunion and then we didn't have another until the 40th! I guess we were all too busy raising families or working and studying to think about that. It was at

the 40th that I asked Nancy Rendell her age. She's ten years older than me so she was 29 when she came out to Edmonton to begin the new school. Back in 1954 we thought she was old!

Fifty Years Later

All the class came except Helen and Bev. to our 50th anniversary. Moyna also attended but Nancy, living in Oregon, was unable to come as her husband was not well. The Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine (the lowly little school is long gone and they are now housed in elegant Corbett Hall) did us proud. We were honoured at the Alberta Rehabilitation Coordinating Council dinner, an annual gala where practitioners in the fields of physical therapy, occupational therapy and speech-language pathology are recognized. We were introduced and then awards were interspersed with stories of our class read by us. They tied our history to the history of the profession and the Faculty. There was a 7- piece band and they introduced each decade with appropriate music, beginning with Rock Around the Clock and Love me Tender from the 50s.

Nancy Reynolds and Dean Al Cook of the Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine met with Berniece and me to plan the evening and Nancy wrote the script. Here are some excerpts:

“Let's begin with the school years. A first not just for the all female class of '56 ...but for the profession and for the university. These were the first women ever to take anatomy in the medical school Anatomy lab at the U of A...the beginning of the profession of PT in Alberta – a field that has progressed from requiring a diploma to now requiring a Masters degree for entry to practise.”

Shirley Allin Moar

I remember...

- *It was a time of white uniforms, white stockings, white shoes and, at the WCB, plain white nurses' caps! The starch in the uniform made movement difficult during the first hour or so of the day. And who could keep those caps on?*
- *It was a time when the doctor ordered the treatment and we just followed the orders. We physios had to persuade the doctor if we wanted to change the treatment. It was a long time before the standard order was "Assess and treat".*

Shirley Dominy Le Pers

I remember ...

- *When campus life was simple.*
- *Bobby sox and saddle shoes in 20 degrees below zero were the norm.*

- *The boys in residence would hang over the windows to see the “Physio Students” in the old math lab building.*
- *All 15 of us tromping across the quad with “Miss Rendell” in tow.*

Lynn Houston Bowers

I remember.....

- *When a pregnant woman had to resign with no benefits whatsoever.*
- *At UAH, hiding from Mr. Littlefair, (also known as Mr. Tinycircus). We would all jump in our lockers and shut the doors. It worked too, until the bottom fell out of one locker*
- *Playing volleyball at work and after work and at class parties.*
- *Going to the tuck shop as a group and eating the famous cinnamon buns.*

Berniece Donais Malone

I remember....

Our class consistently beat the other faculties and achieved 100% participation in the annual blood drives...an accomplishment apparently still recalled by peers from other faculties who were unable to build that kind of team commitment within their class. The commitment and drive for the class of '56 was so strong that on one occasion it resulted in us literally dragging one classmate by the feet into the room to donate...she had fainted, but we didn't let that little complication stand in our way...we wanted to win...and we did....again!

Donna Wood Ing

I remember.....

- *Us all going to the med building (en mass with Nancy following) and being whistled at and shouted at by a bunch of med students, one of whom had put a cadaver arm up his coat sleeve. He singled out Bev to shake her hand but she, having already done anatomy at U of T for one year, was unfazed. He was terribly disappointed and if he'd picked anyone else, it would have been a different story. Remember we were the first women students the anatomy department had had – there were no women in medicine in 1954.*
- *A cadaver in the lab being rigged by the med students who always got to them before us, so that when one of us moved the sheet covering the body, the cadaver got a hard on and up it came!*
- *Six new grads invading the U of A hospital. The place was never the same.*
- *That I was ridiculously happy during my University years.*

We had an opportunity to share about our work lives too.

Sue Fife

I remember...

- *Mona McLaughlin, Helen Hays and I went to England in 1958 where Mona worked at the Royal National Orthopedic Hospital. Later, I studied at the University of Saskatchewan and received my MSc. (Anatomy Department) in 1972.*
- *Bev Lee Buchanan was in charge of a private practice in Regina within six weeks of graduation. She has headed up many departments in Texas and is still working at 71 years of age as the Director of a department in Louisiana.*

Marianne Lindsay Roberts

I remember....

- *I was in private practice with an orthopedic surgeon as early as 1958. In the 60's, I was billing \$4 per treatment!*
- *Women in the fifties never expected to work after they married and had children. For sure, after they had children. Some of us followed the traditional path, stopping work as a physical therapist after the birth of a child. Not stopping work, just stopping work for pay. Others never married and worked in hospitals, large and small, and in private practice in many parts of the country. Others were among the first women of the era to juggle work and family. Some went back to work after a period out of it to have children. Esther volunteered with a riding program for disabled children. Although several of us traveled widely, all but one, Bev, came back to Canada to live and work.*

Margot Parker Landels

I remember...

- *In Innsbruck in 1959, "Gemueseplatte mit ei" was one of my favourites! Being a cheapie got me to stay about a year and a half that time! I even learned to brush my teeth with Tide!
The work in outpatients in the Innsbruck hospital was great. We had three-hour lunch breaks and worked from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. every night. My room in an ancient apartment building was \$12 a month. I soon learned to communicate with the friendly patients. In the Innsbruck hospital I even treated the priest of Maria from the Sound of Music. A friend met me there in June and we hitched around for a month or two, staying in Youth Hostels before I elected to stay as an "au pair"*

- *It was a humbling experience to realize how culturally ill-educated I was and that experience prompted me to register in the Faculty of Letters in Grenoble as an "auditeur libre" and even later go back to UBC for my BA in French and German Lit.*
- *I spent another year (1964) working in Switzerland before hitch hiking to the Balearic Islands for a second time.*

More from the script of the evening:

"We'd like to share with you a few of the reflections from the class of '56 on their chosen career."

"I have never regretted the decision to become a PT. I always enjoyed clinical and management and working with other rehab professionals. I consider myself a very lucky person."

Aline Baril McMillan

- *I had many mentors along the way who helped me realize my dreams. They gave me the confidence I needed by believing in me. It spurred me on to change my professional path as I saw fit. Going to take the NDT (Neurodevelopmental Treatment) course in Seattle provided me with a new aspect to my career and was the element that took me to Saudi Arabia to take charge of a Pediatric Section of the Department.*
- *Although I knew almost nothing of what Physical Therapy was about in 1954, it was a decision that shaped my life and made me who I am today.*
- *I have been blessed and feel that my decision in 1954 to attend the University of Alberta was the best decision I have ever made.*

"The rehabilitation field has broadened itself into many new areas of practice. Expanding job opportunities, often identifying and developing opportunities, true professional pioneering, has characterized the last 50 years of practice."

Elaine Hirst Roberts

Independent Therapists Ltd. was a different kind of private practice, owned and operated by four physical therapists and one occupational therapist, who was also the president! We were breaking the law in 1979 when the Act governing physical therapy stated that a physical therapy corporation must be wholly owned by physical therapists. We were confident the law would be changed and the legal advice we got was to "be bold". Initially, our client was the Edmonton Home Care Program. But word got out about this company that would send therapists to home

care clients, institutions for disabled people, schools, small hospitals, places that didn't need a full time therapist but could use some rehab service. We added a couple of speech clinicians too. We supervised students some of whom are here at the ARCC dinner. The company closed in 1987. It was the best work experience of my life.

The evening ended with the music, "Canadian Sunset" and "The Party's Over". What more can I say? It was a wonderful event. One of the band members, Jeff Bisanz, sent this e-mail a few days later:

In case you hadn't heard, everyone in the band had an absolutely fabulous time Friday night. The youngest guy among us--Bill, the guitarist--was beaming from start to finish, and we all commented afterward about how much fun the entire evening was. What made it fun? First, your classmates were singing along with us from the very opening number--we all got a big kick out of that! Second, the stories you and your classmates told, plus the reactions to those stories, were very engaging, sometime hilarious, and always informative about an important period in the University's history. Third, we really enjoyed participating in the surprise for Al near the end of the evening. We first rehearsed the song we played ("What a Wonderful World") at 5:00 p.m. that afternoon, while Al was at your reception so we weren't really sure what would happen! Fourth, we all really liked the music.

Fifth and most importantly, I think we all were a bit in awe of what your class has accomplished in terms of pioneering leadership, and so contributing to the event made us feel particularly good. I wish the current crop of rehab students could have been on hand so that they could get a sense for the roots of their profession, and also for how they and their classmates might be on the cutting edge of change, just as you were on the cutting edge of change several decades ago.

Gifts to and from the University

At the reception which Jeff mentioned, each member of the class was presented with a starfish pin and a vest embroidered with the crest of the University and "Physical Therapy 1956-2006".

Our class had raised \$17,000 to start the Class of '56 Bursary, which was then presented to the Dean of the Faculty. The Fund has since risen to more than \$25,000. The proceeds are provided to an undergraduate physical therapy student who has good marks and a financial need. I spoke on behalf of the class.

The class of '56 is honoured that the faculty made this opportunity to help us celebrate this special anniversary, one that, when we graduated, none of us ever imagined would happen. We couldn't imagine ever getting this old!!

It's also a special anniversary for the faculty and it's a privilege for us to be able to give something to you. It's fun to think of a bursary named for the class of '56 that will go on for longer than any of us.

We would be remiss if we didn't pay tribute to our teachers – Nancy Rendell Martin and Moyna Gordon Parker.

Fresh from receiving her teaching qualification, Nancy came west to be the only teacher of physical therapy skills in the newly formed School of Physiotherapy at the U of A. Brave soul – brave and smart, committed and professional. Miss Hirst, Miss Donais, Miss etc. etc. It was probably the first time anyone had consistently called any of us “Miss”. Nancy was an amazing role model, even if it drove us crazy that she followed us around from class to class. She wasn't really following us around – she wanted to know what we were being taught.

Year 2 saw the arrival of Moyna Gordon from England to take over some of the physical therapy teaching. Warm and supportive, she brought another perspective to us and some welcome relief for Nancy. She taught us some of the new and emerging techniques – like PNF (does anyone know what that is anymore?) and ultra sound. Yes, ultra sound – now a standby modality, was a new technique in 1956.

We owe both of them a debt of gratitude.

I want you to know we were a good class. We..were.. good. In the years since graduation, we've gathered more than once and every time we meet, we get better! Thank you again for this evening.

The following day, there was a luncheon hosted by the Class of '61 where Margo Parker Landels presented a portrait, in oils, of Nancy Rendell to the Faculty. We were grateful to the class of '61 for inviting us to their party and for making a significant contribution to the Class of '56 Bursary that day.

It continues to be an honour and a delight to be a member of the Class of '56, the first class of physical therapists to graduate in Alberta. No longer women of the fifties, we are women of the 21st century, bringing with us the qualities that made us good therapists – adaptability, compassion, energy, enthusiasm and commitment.



Back row: Mona McLaughlin McLennan, Sue Fife, Margot Parker Landels, Donna Wood Ing, Moyna Gordon Parker

Middle: Elaine Hirst Roberts, Marianne Lindsay Roberts, Shirley Dominy Le Pers, Esther Williams Macdonald

Front: Shirley Allin Moar, Berniece Donais Malone, Aline Baril McMillan, Lynne Houston Bowers

Rosemary Mielke died in February, 2005.



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