

by Geoffrey Douglas

# Nurse, Teacher, Mentor, Pioneer, Philanthropist:

*The Many Missions – and Triumphs – of a Fifty-three Year Career*

When May Futrell was a young girl, part of a large extended family in a Vermont farming town, her grandparents' ages — and their aging — seemed as natural to her as her own. All four were nearby, and all four happy and healthy; their presence and their love for her, she says today, were among the bulwarks of her life:

“[One] grandfather especially — he was a big influence on me, then and later. I think that, as a young person, if you have a good experience with your grandparents, as I did, you emerge with a positive view of aging.”

So it came as a shock to her several years later when, as a young nursing student doing hospital duty, she was told one day by a senior nurse to go clean up the mess of an elderly woman who, neglected too long, now lay in bed covered in her own feces.

“There was no [such thing as] ‘care for the aged,’” she says. “The other nurses were tired of her, so the students got stuck with the job.”

The dissonance of these two experiences struck her deeply — and ultimately, defined her career. By the 1960s, having earned her master's degree in nursing from Columbia, she was teaching nursing taking courses at Boston University. In the fall of 1970, she began her career at UMass Lowell — then Lowell State College — as a member of the nursing faculty. Five years later, she would earn a certificate in gerontological nursing from the University of Southern California, followed a year later by a Ph.D. from Brandeis in social policy and social gerontology.



May Futrell

Her dissertation subject was the attitudes of physicians, nurses and social workers toward the elderly, as well as health maintenance services for the same group — a pair of causes that have consumed her ever since.

Her commitment, now as then, remains rooted in the simplest sort of truth: “Everyone loves children — maternity nursing has always been a popular specialty. But that's not where the [greatest] need lies. We're not getting more children; we're getting more older people. And we need more educated nurses to care for them.”

It's a goal she's been working toward filling for close to forty years. In 1975, directly as a result of her efforts, the University received government funding to implement a program, under her direction, to educate gerontological nurse practitioners (GNPs) at the master's-degree level. It was the first graduate program in the U.S. to educate primary-care GNPs.

Her efforts haven't been confined to the Lowell campus. As author of many articles and two textbooks — including the first GNP textbook, “Primary Health Care of the Older Adult,” published in

1980; as primary investigator on countless research projects and consultant to many nursing schools, and as co-leader of study trips to Russia and Spain, she has been an influential voice in the evolution of healthcare for older adults.

“She has paved the way for advanced-practice nurse preparation,” wrote UMass Lowell Nursing Department Chair Karen Devereaux Melillo in an article in the *Journal of Gerontological Nursing* last year. “She has influenced hundreds of graduates. She has been an inspirational leader and pioneer.”

♦♦♦♦♦♦♦♦

Today, four years after her retirement as chair of the UMass Lowell Nursing Department — a position she held for twenty-three years of her thirty-five-year faculty tenure — her focus, if anything, has broadened. While she remains an abiding advocate for GNP training, she is at least as concerned these days with what she regards as the nation's “potentially traumatic” shortage of professional nurses, as well as nursing teachers.

Quietly and from a distance, she's doing what she can to correct it. In 2002, three years before her retirement, she launched the May Futrell Scholarship Endowment Fund, which has since awarded \$26,000 to nineteen UMass Lowell graduate nursing students — between \$1,000 and \$4,000 each — on the condition that they pursue their degrees full-time (preference is given to doctoral students with a focus on gerontological nursing).

Students like Cathy Fogg, an '09 Ph.D. graduate and today an assistant professor of nursing at St. Anselm College, whose dissertation — on HIV screening among the homeless — was

*Continued*

presented this year at the international conference of Sigma Theta Tau, an international honors nursing society. “An outstanding student whose work has significant implications for issues involving HIV and the homeless population,” according to Barbara Mawn, interim director of the University’s Ph.D. nursing program, Fogg spent months visiting homeless centers all over New England to gather material for her research. “The costs of that would have been a real burden for her,” says Mawn, “without the help she got from the fund. It made a very big difference for her, I know.”

Or Yuan Zhang, who has been in the Ph.D. program since 2007 and remains there today. “A truly brilliant student,” says Mawn, “she faced some heavy challenges coming over from China on her own, then mastering the language and the culture and still managing to excel.” On top of that, Mawn says, Zhang went back to China between semesters last year to be married, then returned for the spring semester — all of that on the stipend she was earning as a research assistant in the Department of Work Environment.

“It’s hard to imagine all the challenges she’s faced,” says Mawn, “a new student like that, all by herself in a strange new country. It had to be very tough. But from what I know, the funds she was given [\$4,000, the most any single student has received] made an important difference in her life.”

May Futrell has made a difference in too many lives to count: family, friends, students, faculty, the elderly, the recipients of her scholarships, the readers of her works. But for all her willingness (and she is always willing) to talk about her causes — the nursing shortage, the teacher shortage, the need for more GNP training — she is famously reluctant when the subject turns to her.



**Yuan Zhang, a recent recipient of the May Futrell Scholarship Endowment, at her wedding in China last winter, with her husband looking on. Zhang, currently enrolled in the graduate nursing program, went back to her homeland between semesters to get married.**

“No, no,” she will tell you, “the story is about the program, not about me.” The problem with that, of course, is that it’s often difficult to separate the two.

“The strongest support our program has had, since its infancy, has come from her,” says Barbara Mawn. “She’s had the vision, she’s provided the intellectual atmosphere, and much of the guidance — for all of us, for everyone involved. And her financial support, obviously, has been invaluable. A lot of our [graduate] students are juggling family, school and careers, sometimes almost unbelievably. She understands that. That’s what those dollars are there for, to lift at least a portion of that stress...”

“The challenge of our program — which May has been clear about from the start — is to continue to attract top-notch, qualified students as well as future researchers, and to get the right people [in the nursing professions] to be willing to leave the work force and return to the educational arena. Her leadership has made all of that more attainable.

“For me personally, and for a lot of us in program, I think, she’s been both a mentor and a role model. An inspiration. I couldn’t be more grateful”



Meanwhile, while her example sets the standard for other teachers and her

dollars help keep students in school, May Futrell, now in her mid-seventies, continues to engage with the world. Quite a lot of the world, as it happens.

“I’ve been nearly everywhere, traveled to nearly every country,” she said one day last spring, sitting between appointments in a conference room in Southwick Hall, finally succumbing to a few questions about herself. “I’m just back from South Africa. My next trip will be to Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand — I’ve never been to those countries before, but there aren’t many like that left. I love to travel, I love to see new places. I’m now doing the U.S. all over again.”

**“I’ve known what I was meant to do in the world. And I’ve done it. And I’ll just keep doing whatever I can, as long as I can. Because there’s no use at all in just sitting around.” — May Futrell**

Even when she’s home, she’s seldom still for long. Whether it’s volunteer work at the Firehouse Theatre in Newburyport, where she lives, or any of the list of services she continues to perform for UMass Lowell — editing her publications, interviewing faculty applicants, serving on the Department’s alumni board — she is rarely, and very reluctantly, idle.

“I like to stay useful, I like to stay active, even though it can be harder these days. I’ve been very lucky. Ever since I woke up from a [tonsillectomy] operation at the age of sixteen, and saw the nurse standing over me, and said to myself, ‘That’s it!’ *That’s what I want to be!* — I’ve known what I was meant to do in the world. And I’ve done it. And I’ll just keep doing whatever I can, as long as I can. Because there’s no use at all in just sitting around.”