

Retired nursing leader chose the “best” profession

FOR JOSEPHINE FLAHERTY, THE DESIRE TO BECOME AN RN WAS CLEAR WHEN SHE WAS ONLY THREE YEARS OLD.

IT WAS THE FALL OF 1956 AND 22-year-old RN Josephine Flaherty had just arrived at a Red Cross outpost in northern Ontario. She was the community’s only health-care professional despite having graduated from the University of Toronto’s (U of T) nursing program only three months prior.

As she unpacked her bags, two men knocked on her door to notify her of an emergency.

babies in a canoe en route to the nearest hospital.

Although this kind of intense – and rather frightening – experience was the exception rather than the rule in Flaherty’s decades-long career, the now retired RN says she was prepared for all the challenges the profession would bring. And she knew she could handle them from the early age of three. That’s when she declared to her

a research assistant at Toronto’s St. Michael’s Hospital. She would go on to receive a B.A. in history from U of T, and a master’s degree and PhD (each with a focus on education for RNs) from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). Flaherty had ambitions of becoming an educator herself, and eventually taught at U of T, OISE, and the University of Western Ontario (UWO).

rewards of her career was “being with students and helping them by opening up the world of nursing to them.” She has received many awards for her decades of practice, but says the one she treasures most is an honorary life membership from the Canadian Nursing Students’ Association.

In the early 70s, Flaherty was president of RNAO. She encouraged staff to talk to nurses about what nursing is, not just what nurses do.

“RNAO was doing a lot in those days, but nothing in comparison to what it’s doing now,” she says, impressed by the association’s growing international profile. For many years, Flaherty acted as parliamentarian at annual general meetings (AGM). In 55 years of membership, she’s only missed two AGMs, and has been awarded member emeritus status and an honorary life membership.

Flaherty was also a leader at the national level. For almost two decades she was Principal Nursing Officer of Canada. In addition to sitting on a variety of federal and provincial committees, she visited hospitals, public health facilities and outposts all over the world.

She has fond memories of her wide-ranging career. “You name it in nursing and I’ve done it,” she says. “It’s the best profession and I’ve never one day regretted being in it.” **RN**

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PHOTO: MARK HOLLERON/TECKLES PHOTOGRAPHY

Three things you don’t know about Josephine Flaherty:

1. Her favourite book is *Anne of Green Gables*. She admires the famous redhead for always speaking her mind.
2. Her first job: a paper route at age 12.
3. One of her most prized possessions is a tiny, solid gold nativity scene inlaid in a stone the size of a tangerine. It was a gift from a Catholic priest in Papua New Guinea.

She followed them down to the river. They motioned to a canoe, which she flipped over and paddled herself to the secluded log home of a 51-year-old woman in labour. Flaherty had never delivered a baby, but managed to bring a healthy boy into the world by candlelight. One year later, the same woman was pregnant with twins and Flaherty delivered those premature

mother that she wanted to be a nurse. In fact, her first “patient” was her sister who had polio and spent three years in a hospital bed in the family’s dining room. Flaherty was 10-years-old when she assumed responsibility for helping her 12-year-old sibling do her daily exercises.

Flaherty spent two years at that northern Ontario Red Cross outpost where she got her start in nursing. In 1958, she became

She was dean of the Nursing School at UWO from 1973 to 1977. She was so passionate about education that she continued to teach classes while assuming all of the other responsibilities of dean. And she surprised all of her colleagues with her dedication when she taught with her jaw wired shut for a year after surviving a serious car accident.

She says one of the greatest