



A Nurse First | Episode 7

A founding friend

Nancy Thompson: I was very fortunate to attend a Sigma convention here in Indianapolis in the very late 1980s. And at that particular convention, one of the founders, Elizabeth McWilliams Miller, for whom Sigma provides the research award was present, and I got to meet her and her daughter.

[Welcome to A Nurse First. This is Nancy Thompson telling her own special Founders Day related A Nurse First story.]

Nancy Thompson: And we just struck up a friendship. She was delightful and had a little twinkle in her eye, a great sense of humor.

[Elizabeth McWilliams Miller was born on 29 July 1901 in Olney, Illinois, the only founder not born and raised in Indiana. She chose to attend the Indiana University Training School for Nurses in Indianapolis. And on 7 September 1922, she, along with five other nursing students who all also happened to be her dorm room neighbors, went for a picnic to discuss their idea to create an organization to recognize nursing merit in scholarship.]

With the wheels set in motion, the six founders took their idea to one of their professors, Ethel P. Clark. They thought of her as extremely critical and strict, so they knew if she thought the organization was a good idea, that it really had legs to stand on. Ethel was intrigued but told the founders she would need some time to read and think about their 11-page proposal.

Encouraged by her initial interest, the founders were still surprised when Ethel returned their proposal to them a few days later, giving them her full support. Now the real hard work began—turning this idea into reality. The founders were not content to take their time though. As graduation loomed, they knew it was now or never. So in the next five weeks, their time was consumed by defining objectives and requirements, designing insignia, picking a flower, choosing a name, developing a pin, selecting colors, and creating the organization's charter, bylaws, and constitution. That work led to Sigma Theta Tau's official approval by the Indiana Secretary of State on 5 October 1922, and Alpha Chapter's first induction ceremony on 16 October 1922.

Elizabeth went on to attend George Washington University and worked as a Public Health Nurse around the United States. She had three sons and one daughter and eventually settled in Miami, Florida, where she remained a prominent voice for Sigma and nursing.

Nancy Thompson: I had a wicked case of hero worship, meeting a founder for Sigma Theta Tau. And I asked her, I said, "Did you have any idea that Sigma would grow into what it is now?" And that, mind you, was back in the 80s. She's like, "I think every pioneer, they don't realize what an impact they're

having." But she said, very proudly, that they all felt very strongly that nursing was a professional discipline and needed to have an honor society to stress and strive for certain scholastic and leadership and scholarship roles.

We stayed in touch. I was very fortunate to be able to write back and forth, actually her daughter did most of the writing, and to go visit her in Miami, Florida, when the University of Miami College of Nursing presented her with a lifetime achievement award. So it was really my good fortune to meet her and become friends with her.

[I could only imagine how meeting a Sigma founder would reinvigorate your passion for both the organization and nursing. Looking back, why did you want to be a nurse, and what do you love about what you do now?]

Nancy Thompson: I am probably one of those proverbial, "I always wanted to be a nurse person," ever since I was a little girl. I even have my Nurse Nancy book from when I was a little girl, with real original band-aids. I was just drawn to it. I enjoyed caring for people. I'm very much a people person. I'm into relationships. That's the kind of characteristic that resonates with me. And so I knew that someday I would become a nurse.

I would never be anything else but a nurse. It's just a wonderful career. Well, actually, it's more than a career, it's a lifestyle choice. I am now a part-time clinical faculty at the University of Massachusetts Amherst College of Nursing, and I work primarily with the accelerated nursing students, and absolutely love working with them. They are challenging and intelligent and motivated and goal-directed, and I love it. I love being able to share my passion of nursing with them and working with them. For me, that's a giveback. I can help mold future nurses.

Sigma has given to me so much. I have met incredible people, incredible nurses. I stand in awe, and I'm inspired by what nurses do. And I come here to conventions and even the local meetings and listen to what nurses are doing in terms of research, scholarship, leadership, and service. I still feel it's a privilege to be a member of Sigma and a privilege to be a nurse.

[Nancy, will you join me in wishing Sigma a happy birthday?]

Nancy Thompson: Congratulations, Sigma. What a milestone.

[Thank you for listening to A Nurse First from Sigma. If you loved this episode, do us a favor and subscribe, rate, and leave us a review. It is very much appreciated. For more information about A Nurse First and Sigma, visit sigmanursing.org. Until next time.]