

## 100 years of care from Sisters of Mercy



Sister Roxanne Dolak pauses before thanking an audience of Kalispell Regional Medical Center staffers while Chief Medical Officer Craig Eddy puts his arm around her Wednesday during a celebration of 100 years of the Sisters of Mercy providing hospital care in Kalispell.

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### Candace Chase/Daily Inter Lake

On a blustery day in 2002, Sister Roxanne Dolak braved a high ride in a lift to write a lasting message from the Sisters of Mercy on a beam supporting the new entry at Kalispell Regional Medical Center.

“God, bless this building and all who enter here.”

Dolak, 76, said she missed the first opportunity to write on the beam, a long tradition, before it was hoisted into place. She was delighted when Don Williams, head of construction, raised her up to record those words for posterity from herself and her order based in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

“And so I tell people, whenever you come into this building, you receive a blessing,” she said solemnly, then broke into an impish smile. “Even if it’s just to use the toilet.”

With that unholy image, she threw back her head and broke into her trademark laughter.

Dolak, a registered nurse, chart auditor and the sole remaining member of Sisters of Mercy at the hospital, told the story in an interview and then during a celebration Wednesday remembering another blustery day — Sept. 1, 1910 — when three members of her order arrived in Kalispell to build and operate a hospital under the auspices of Kalispell General Hospital Corporation.

“Sisters Mary Philomena, Clement and Vincentia had just settled down for lunch at the cottage when a call came from Dr. [C.I.] O’Neil, asking if the nursing sisters had arrived,” she said. “He had a patient very sick with typhoid fever. The man was promptly admitted and Kalispell General Hospital became a reality.”

In a hospital history book, “The Biggest Little Hospital in the West,” author Nancy Greer, a nurse in charge of Kalispell Professional Staffing Services, fills in the first days of medicine in the valley. She also recorded the contributions of the Sisters of Mercy hospital governance through September 1973 as well as continuing work such as Dolak’s.

According to Greer, the sisters followed several other pioneers, including Ella Webber, a nurse who established the very first hospital in 1896 at the corner of Center Street (then Railroad Street) and Fourth Avenue East. Webber’s venture ended in 1904 when the Great Northern Railway moved its division point and the majority of her patients to Whitefish.

Although the first hospital, a second and third folded, business and community leaders in Kalispell didn’t give up. When the Reservation Homestead Act passed in 1909, they redoubled their efforts to establish a hospital to serve the expected population boom.

A Kalispell Methodist Deaconess Hospital Board formed at nearly the same time as Kalispell General Hospital Corporation, both looking to start a health-care facility. The latter jumped into the lead when Bishop John Carroll of the Helena diocese took an interest and approached the Sisters of Mercy for help.

“All Sisters of Mercy make a vow to God of service to the poor, the sick, and the ignorant,” Dolak said. “I made the same vow when I became a Sister of Mercy.”

In 1910, Carroll traveled to Iowa where he convinced Mother Gertrude, head of the order, to send nuns to Kalispell in April to assess the need and potential for success. By August, a contract was made and two nuns arrived to raise money, buy supplies and stock the temporary building provided as a hospital.

Later, three more nuns arrived by train to nurse the sick. They began with a successful experience with that first patient with typhoid fever.

“He was cared for and then discharged as improved on Sept. 12,” Dolak said. “His total bill for those 12 days was \$28.”

Over the next two years, Mother Mary Agatha Mullaney oversaw the building at a cost of \$46,000 of a brick-and-concrete, four-story hospital on Fifth Avenue East. The community provided \$20,000 and the Sisters of Mercy contributed the rest.

“Through the years, additions were made to Kalispell General Hospital, including a new wing on the south side in 1949, and a convent wing on the north in 1963,” Dolak said. “It’s been through some interesting events, including two earthquakes.”

One of the most intriguing events took place in December 1925. Dolak said it started with the nuns smelling burning rubber while eating a late supper.

Not long after, a tremendous explosion shook the building, blowing out all the windows on the south and west sides and savaging the plumbing. Dynamite was the source of the explosion.

“A woman who wanted to do damage to her husband, a patient at the hospital, got a neighbor boy to place a fuse through the window of the sisters’ dining room on the ground floor,” she said. “No one was injured. The citizens of Kalispell chipped in to clean up the mess and restore the damage.”

Dolak’s personal history with the Sisters of Mercy began in 1951 when she joined the order right out of high school at the age of 17. She said she had no second thoughts about the commitment.

“I was always a prayerful girl,” she said. “I knew since I was a little kid that I wanted to be a nun.”

Dolak first came to Kalispell in 1964 to teach at St. Matthew's School, but she knew the nuns serving the hospital very well. She said they would all get together for holidays and other occasions.

She rents and lives in the convent house and exercises in the neighborhood where the old hospital still stands, now renovated into a housing and office complex called Eastside Brick.

"When I run through there, I think about the history and I think about those gatherings," she said. "I'm glad that old building, which has so much history, still stands today."

Dolak left her teaching job to go home to care for her ailing father. She said that was when she got the idea that she wanted to return to college to become a nurse.

She received her degree in 1972. Three years later, Dolak realized her dream of returning to the Flathead Valley. It was after the Sisters of Mercy ended their collaboration on running the hospital — but not the service of individual members of their order.

"My first day of work was on the fourth- floor surgical unit on the 3 to 11 shift, June 30, 1975," she said. "George Clark was the new administrator."

Dolak said she moved up to Montana with two other nuns to join Sister Mary Regis and Sister Mary Brendan. She said Brendan served as the prime proponent behind the building of the nursing home that bears her name.

According to Dolak, Brendan set up discharge planning for the hospital and became aware that she had no place to send patients who needed intermediate nursing care after their hospitalization. Dolak described her as a feisty woman with a vision for a facility on the hospital campus.

"Sister Brendan did not just stop with faith in God's providence — she pestered George Clark and the administration until they acted," she said.

When the building was finished in 1985, the hospital administration brought Brendan back for the grand opening. Dolak held up two photographs of Brendan during her speech Wednesday.

“Imagine her surprise and delight when the curtain was pulled and the name Brendan House was revealed,” Dolak said.

On Jan. 17, 1976, she moved with the rest of the staff to the new hospital that still exists, much expanded, on Sunnyview Lane. Dolak credits Clark and today’s Chief Executive Officer Velinda Stevens with carrying forward the traditions of faith and vision that allowed Northwest Healthcare to pioneer in so many areas such the helicopter ambulance service.

“ALERT was the second air ambulance service established in the United States,” she said.

Dolak wrapped up her speech at the centennial celebration to a standing ovation. She urged Kalispell Regional Medical Center staffers to continue with vision and faith in God and their mission to serve the people of Northwest Montana and “even those Canadians who come down here.”

Although Dolak is 76, she is in good health with no plan of retiring in the near future. When she does, Dolak said she will return to the Sisters of Mercy home in Cedar Rapids where she began almost 60 years ago.

Many of her earlier colleagues such as Brendan have died.

“I like to think that she and all the other sisters who have worked here, especially those pioneers who came in 1910, continue to smile down on us from heaven and ask God to bless Kalispell Regional Medical Center,” Dolak said.

People interested in more about the hospital’s history may buy Greer’s book, “The Biggest Little Hospital in the West” at the hospital’s gift shop. All profits support the foundation benefiting the hospital.

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