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A NEW FRONTIER

Midwifery is thriving in the 21st century thanks to Frontier Nursing University

by Julie Wilson

"Sometimes I feel like we get so focused on our history, our wonderful rich history, that sometimes people don't see our vision for the future."

This is the challenge Dr. Susan E. Stone, president and dean of Frontier Nursing University, faces on the daily. Instead, she hopes people see the history of this 75-year-old midwifery institution as the launch pad for the high-tech approach it's taking today.

High-tech midwifery? Sounds like a classic oxymoron, along the lines of plastic silverware or jumbo shrimp. But in the case of FNU, they have created a way to keep the practice of midwifery alive through its distance learning program.

HISTORY REPEATED

"Distance learning" takes on a whole new meaning when you go back to FNU's roots. Founded in Hyden by Mary Breckinridge in 1925 (known as Frontier Nursing Service then) as a way to provide prenatal and childbirth care in the client's home, the 11 midwives in employ would pack their gear and travel around southeast Kentucky on horseback.

As Dr. Stone explained, FNU has evolved from horses to Jeeps and now to the Internet, but the soul of what Breckinridge created still thrives. "We bring lessons of what history taught us and bring to today's world," Dr. Stone says. "I think [Mary Breckinridge] would be pleased."

Not only because of the online classes but because they are keeping the practice of midwifery alive and relevant.

YES, IT STILL EXISTS

You say "midwife" and one of two things usually occur: 1) What's that? or 2) People still do that? Well, the answer to the latter is absolutely!

Maggie Stanley, CNM, learned of FNU while growing up



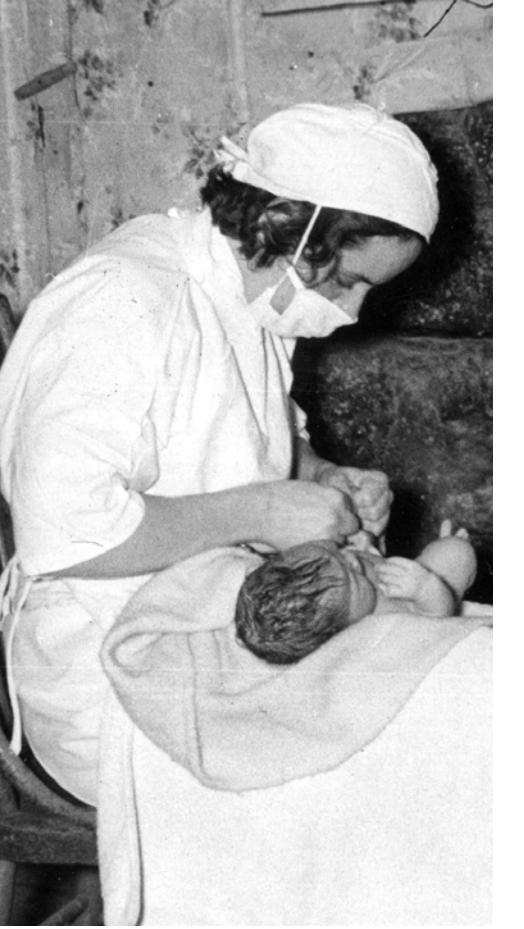
MYTHS DEBUNKED

Part of the reason people can't believe there are still practicing licensed midwives is that they still envision the horseback-riding baby-catchers of Breckinridge's day. Damara Jenkins, CNM, has a bustling practice in Jeffersonville, Ind. "No one has a clear understanding of what's legal, what our education trained us for," Jenkins says.

Here is a partial list of what certified midwives can do:

- Prescribe medicine
- Attend births at hospitals
- Prenatal care
- Postpartum care





Midwifery is more than just about giving birth at home. In fact, it was learning that midwives could attend births at hospitals that convinced Stanley to add to her previous education as an obstetrics nurse. "As an OB nurse that worked in a high-risk setting with preterm births, drug addiction and women of generally poor health, I was on the fence about this whole home birth thing," she admits. "I do believe in home births, however it's not for all women."

Stanley works closely with obstetricians at the hospital if she experiences anything outside of the norm. "I enjoy offering the midwifery philosophy of care to women in the hospital setting," she says. "That is, pregnancy and birth are a natural physiological process, not an illness unless proven otherwise."

THE MAGIC OF HYDEN

A huge part of this confidence comes from the training students receive at FNU. And while a lot of the work is done online, all students are required to come to the Hyden campus for two weeks of hands-on learning. In Hyden. A town with a population of around 365.

"The first time I saw it, I was taken aback. I thought my trip there was really scary, I hadn't seen anything like it," admits Karsnitz. "It was very different, but I soon came to love it."

Dr. Stone explains that Karsnitz is not the only student who questioned their decision when they first arrived on campus. "There was so much poverty in upstate New York," she explains of her hometown, "not quite as much as southeast Kentucky, but it really didn't feel like a whole different world for me."

So much so that she moved to Hyden in 1998 to join the faculty at FNU. Today Stone lives in Berea, the halfway mark between the administrative offices in Lexington and the Hyden campus.

In fact, the area isn't too unlike where many of FNU's students come from. "We have a big focus on rural. This is the way they can access healthcare education," explains Dr. Stone. "Actually, 72% of our students come from federally designated rural areas."

And one feeds the other, as FNU requires its students to go into their own communities for class assignments. "They really get to know more about their community, which can serve them well in the future," she says.

It was Karsnitz's time at FNU that helped prepare her when she went to work in Harrisburg. "My education at Frontier was utilized to open a freestanding birth center in Harrisburg," she says. "Frontier always demanded more; we did at least double what all the other schools required."

That's why experiencing the Hyden campus is essential to their training, says Dr. Stone. "We surveyed students and there's some special magic down there. You come in and feel the nurses who walked before you walking on those roads," she says. "There is something about it that makes it so real. You think if Mary Breckinridge could come here and do what she did, I guess I could do it in my town."

And they do, with the help of the network of FNU faculty and fellow students, all with the same mission: to break down the barriers of independent midwifery practice by increasing the number of qualified practitioners around the world ... all from Kentucky. **5**

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