The Lost Opportunities of the Pioneering Show The Nurses

By Andrea Holtz, MPH

"Return with Us Now to Those Thrilling Days of Yesteryear!" Those words from the opening of the old Lone Ranger radio and then television series might also apply to the way many nurses regard their reflection in primetime TV shows: Things looked better in the old days. It's not just nostalgia; academic analyses of the content of TV shows indicate that the high point for nurses came and went four decades ago.

P.J. Haylock grew up in a small town in Iowa. She remembers twisting the dial to tune in The Nurses on CBS.

"The only nurses I knew were the school nurse or the nurses who worked in the doctors' offices, and they didn't really do a whole lot in those days," she said in an interview. "And so when this TV show came on and it had nurses in a big city, and one of the nurses was a student nurse, and she was so pretty, I empathized with her. They showed nurses actually interacting with patients, and with doctors. They showed they had a role, and there was clearly a distinction between what nurses did and what doctors did."

P.J. is now Pamela J. Haylock, RN, MA, a well-known oncology nursing consultant, currently also a doctoral student at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston School of Nursing. Did that positive TV vision of nursing play a role in her decision to become a nurse? "I think it might have," she said.

Doctors in Supporting Roles

The Nurses aired from 1962 to 1965. Shirl Conway played head nurse Liz Thorpe, and a very young Zina Bethune played student nurse Gail Lucas. There were doctors, too, but only in supporting roles.

"From the very beginning we wanted to make it clear that these were not subservient positions," Zina Bethune recalled in an interview for this article. Although she was only 14 when she auditioned for the show's producers, she understood that her character had a strong backbone and a willingness to fight for what she believed was right.

"[The character] really had this definite idea about 'How It Should Be,' and she wanted to live up to that," Bethune said. "That's pretty difficult when the realities around you don't necessarily support the principles you want to adhere to. That was, in essence, the basis of her conflicts almost all the time."

In one episode, a pre-"Star Trek" William Shatner played Gail Lucas' love interest, Dr. Adam Courtland. "There's a scene where he expects her to just fall in line, but she says, 'Hey, I don't walk four paces behind you. I'm just as important in this process.'"

Neither nurse character was shy in her dealings with physicians, especially when her analysis of a patient's situation didn't mesh with the doctor's orders. "They were rather independent about that. That's where Gail Lucas would want to step in and say, 'Wait a minute, I'm working with this patient. I know what's going on. The doctor's giving an order that is not going to help this patient.'"

"What this show did was really allow us as characters to show that side of the nursing profession," Bethune said. "These women were strong professionals. They were not only creative, but had a sound basis for their thoughts."

Not surprisingly, nurses in the TV audience liked what they saw: Characters that made a substantial contribution to medical care. The show was a pioneering series in many ways. It was the first network TV series in the US to star two women, and have men play only supporting roles.

Still, Bethune says that she didn't jump at the role. Although she was working regularly in television, she was also building a career as a dancer, and she was afraid the demands of a weekly series would push dance aside. But her agent urged her to take the role. She finally agreed; and then committed herself to learning about the real world of nurses, shadowing them in a hospital for weeks.

Breaking Taboos

The nurses on the show weren't merely one-dimension- al heroes; some episodes showed nurses failing. One guest character became addict- (continued on page 46)
ACS’s Harmon Eyre & Community Clinical Research Leaders Honored by ACCC

Harmon J. Eyre, MD, Chief Medical Officer of the American Cancer Society, received the Association of Community Cancer Centers’ Annual Achievement Award. Dr. Eyre has played an instrumental role in developing the ACS’s priorities, including efforts to decrease smoking, improve diet, detect cancer at early stages, and provide support for cancer patients. He has also led moves to enhance and focus the Society’s research program, upgrade advocacy capacity, and concentrate community cancer control efforts in areas where they will be most effective. This work follows his academic career as a medical oncologist at the University of Utah, where he was Associate Chairman of Internal Medicine and Deputy Director of the Huntsman Cancer Institute.

Also honored at the ACCC’s Annual National Meeting were the following three physicians, who received the David King Community Clinical Scientific Award:

- **Community C. Frank**, MD, Director of Cancer Research at the Whittingham Cancer Center at Norwalk Hospital and Medical Director of the Mid-Fairfield Hospice in Wilton, CT. Dr. Frank has been actively engaged in studies on blood cancers and has helped raise awareness in the community about the importance of cancer clinical trials.

- **Stephen S. Grubbs**, MD, Medical Oncology Section Chief at the Helen F. Graham Cancer Center of Christiana Care Health System in Newark, DE, and Clinical Assistant Professor of Medicine at Jefferson Medical College of Thomas Jefferson University. Dr. Grubbs is also principal investigator of the Delaware Christiana Care Community Clinical Oncology Program (CCOP) and Colorectal Cancer Committee Chair for the State of Delaware Cancer Consortium and is on ASCO’s Cancer Research Committee.

- **Alan P. Lyss**, MD, Medical Director of the Cancer Research Program of Missouri Baptist Medical Center, Associate Professor of Clinical Medicine at Washington University in St. Louis School of Medicine, Associate Clinical Professor at the University of Missouri School of Medicine, and principal investigator for Heartland Cancer Research CCOP. Dr. Lyss has been actively involved in studies directed toward the prevention of common adult cancers and in efforts to facilitate distribution of innovative cancer care to underserved populations, especially to patients in rural areas.

The award is named for **David K. King**, MD, a former ACCC President who died of cancer and advocated for community clinical research and access to quality care. The Award is given to community clinical research leaders, and recipients become lifetime members of the ACCC National Academy of Community Oncology Scientists, which will serve as a resource to ACCC, the National Cancer Institute, pharmaceutical companies, and other organizations involved in community-based cancer research.

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ed to drugs, during a time when the issue of impaired health care professionals was rarely aired in public. Another guest character turned out to have a secret past: She was a German immigrant who had taken part in Nazi medical experiments during World War II, thus allowing the show to grapple with issues of patients’ rights and medical ethics.

There were also episodes dealing with abortion before the Supreme court’s Roe v. Wade decision. And there were shows in which African-American characters encountered prejudice in the hospital. Bethune credits producer Herbert Brodkin (1912-1990) with daring to break taboos.

In the long-term, though, *The Nurses* failed to permanently break the standard TV mold of dominant physicians and subservient nurses, and nurse characters generally receded into the shadows again after the show’s run.

**Change to Include Doctors**

And in the third year of the show, a change was made to include doctors more prominently, she said. “The head of CBS decided that maybe we should have men as regulars on the show. The name was changed to *The Doctors and the Nurses*, and that’s when the ratings fell.”

Evidently, it was not the right decision.”

After the show went off the air, Zina Bethune continued in show business, appearing in many other TV shows and some films, including Martin Scorsese’s first feature-length film, *Who’s That Knocking at My Door*, opposite Harvey Keitel. She continued dancing, too, establishing a multimedia dance troupe in Los Angeles, called Bethune Theatredanse, and a companion program tailored to disabled children, called Infinite Dreams. In her newest film, last year’s *Wings of Legacy*, she plays a woman near death who passes on her passion for dance to a young woman who uses a wheelchair.

Yet she hasn’t forgotten the TV series of her adolescence. And, she says, neither has its fans.

“The people who were avid fans, and who really appreciated the pioneering efforts of this show, have remained fans and have often lamented that no one picked up the banner and continued.”

“When I look at shows that have nurses now, I go, ‘Huh? What happened?’ They are not being represented in a way that I think is accurate.”

(left to right) Alan P. Lyss, MD; Richard C. Frank, MD; and Stephen S. Grubbs, MD