

The Day NBC Came to the Hills of West Virginia

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“Can you believe it? Paul Cunningham from the NBC Today Show is in town to interview Dr. Hu and Dr. Shearer about that new doctor’s assistant program they got started at the college and hospital.” For the 3,000 inhabitants of Philippi in 1971, nothing seemed unbelievable anymore. The Myers family, especially Dr. Hu, had made believers out of all of them.

Nestled in the hills of West Virginia and chartered in 1844, Philippi was named for Phillip Pendleton Barbour, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, 1836–1841. The first land battle of the Civil War was fought there on June 3, 1861. Union and Confederate troops both used the covered bridge built in 1852 to cross the Tygart River during the battle.¹ The bridge is still used but less now since the new US 250 bypass with its own bridge detours traffic away from downtown. The Union cannon that blasted the newly organized Confederate troops occupied the hill overseeing the town. The hill is now occupied by a small college derived from two institutions, Broaddus College, founded in 1871, and Alderson Academy and Junior College, founded in 1901. Financial hardship forced the two institutions, that shared a common Baptist liberal arts heritage, to merge in the late 1920s into Alderson-Broaddus College.²

The House of Myers, as it became known in the region started when Jehu Winfred (JW) Myers was apprenticed at age 16 to “read medicine” with Dr. Calvert in Tucker County, West Virginia. Three years later, at age 20, JW enrolled in the Physio-Medical College, Indianapolis, Indiana. After completing his studies in 1895, Dr. JW moved to Barbour County to begin practice. He soon married, had six children (one died in infancy) and moved

the family to Philippi in 1910. Although a typical “horse-and-buggy” doctor, he was not old-fashioned in his approach to medicine. Dr. JW is credited for establishing the first telephone company in Barbour County to aid both his patients and himself. Because of the isolation of rural families, he began leaving medicines in local grocery stores and using the telephone to instruct patients about which medicines to purchase and use for their ailments. The manufacturing, labeling, packaging, and distribution of medicines to grocery and drugstores grew over time into a prosperous business run by his wife, Lennie. Eventually, medical advisors were trained to travel to communities to educate locals about health issues, how to self-diagnose common illnesses, and to use medications appropriately.^{3,4}

All five of the Myers children became doctors. Karl, the eldest, was a radiologist. Hu followed, as a surgeon, while the twins, Elmer and Edna, became a pathologist and an obstetrician-gynecologist, respectively. The youngest, Junior, trained as an eye, ear, nose, and throat specialist. Most attended Alderson-Broaddus College before going to medical school, and three, Karl, Hu, and Elmer, returned to Philippi to work as physicians after graduation and residency. Along with their father, Karl and Hu expanded the family-owned clinic and built a 70-bed hospital, the Myers Clinic-Hospital, dedicated in 1933. Within ten years, the Myers Clinic-Hospital developed a regional reputation for diagnostic and therapeutic management of complex medical and surgical problems. Dr. Hu’s reputation as a surgeon, researcher, and inventor of new techniques and equipment became generally known to academic surgeons, and in 1946, the American Board of Surgery approved a surgical residency

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at the institution. Dr. Karl installed one of the first cobalt cancer treatment units in the country, and patients began flocking to Philippi from all over the eastern United States for low-dose radiation treatments.^{3,4,5}

Dr. Hu Myers was a visionary. The college was struggling financially during the 30s and 40s, and the clinic-hospital needed nurses, so in 1938 he approached the college about establishing a nursing program and asking the Baptist to raise funds to build a 100-bed hospital on campus. The college Board rejected the idea initially, but through persistence and gentle persuasions, Dr. Hu's dream took shape, and in 1944, the college announced that it would begin training nurses, and the West Virginia Baptist Convention accepted the challenge to build a hospital on campus. The nursing school successfully opened in 1945, the first degree-granting nursing program in the state, with the Myers Clinic-Hospital used for clinical training. The Baptist were unable to raise enough money for the hospital and would not accept government money, so the college, under the leadership of its newly appointed president, Dr. Richard Shearer, went its separate way and, with Hill-Burton funds, constructed and opened the Broadus Hospital on campus in 1954 (R. E. Shearer, oral communication, April 2002).^{5,6} By this time, Dr. Karl and Dr. Elmer had established a radiology technology program and a medical technology program on campus. Combined, the nursing and allied health students represented a third of the 1,000 students enrolled in the college. All the Myers doctors taught courses to these students. By the 1960s, the House of Myers and the college had become a formidable force for accomplishing the impossible and were in a favorable position to address the country's growing crisis in health care delivery.^{3,4,5}

Dr. Shearer and Dr. Hu Myers, along with their wives, Ruth and Avanelle, became steadfast friends. Avanelle Myers was on the college Board when Dr. Shearer was selected president (R. E. Shearer, oral communication, April 2002). Avanelle met Dr. Hu while attending the college, later worked as his mother's secretary in the family-owned pharmaceutical business, and was his close ally for 61 years of marriage. She recalls that Dr. Hu began toying with the idea of educating physician assistants (PAs) in 1963 and approached the college about starting a degree-granting program for this purpose. The college Board turned him down as they had initially done with the nursing program. With Dr. Shearer's support, the encouragement of physician colleagues around the state, and a visit from Dr. Eugene Stead, Jr., founder of the Duke University PA program, Dr. Hu approached the College again in 1967. This time the Board said that he and Dr. Shearer could have the program, but only if they found a new revenue source. The Board did not want to take funding away from the nursing program.^{3,4,5}

Dr. Hu was disappointed, believing that the faculty had rejected him a second time. However, Dr. Shearer saw a

Figure 1

Dr. Hu C. Myers and Mrs. Avanelle Myers

Credit: Duplicated from the *House of Myers*, McClain Publishing, Parsons, WV with permission of Myers family.

“loophole” and convinced Dr. Myers that all they had to do was find the money. Not understanding how foundations worked, they flew to New York City to visit several prospects. Hearing “no” from the first two foundations, they apprehensively approached the Commonwealth Foundation. They met Dr. Terrance Keenan, senior grants office, and convinced him, after a follow-up visit to the college campus, to give them a planning grant, the first ever given by the foundation to an undergraduate school. With the planning grant and later implementing grant, the first degree-granting program for PAs was launched in 1968. Soon thereafter, Dr. Keenan moved to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and provided additional funding to supplement the Commonwealth funds and underwrite the continued cost of the program, even after Federal funds became available in 1972 (R. E. Shearer, oral communication, April 2002).⁶

Dr. Hu was 66 years old when the program began. Avanelle tried to talk him out of it, believing that they were too old to start something new. But once started, she joined her husband as the program's first administrator and later educational coordinator.⁵ As program director, Dr. Hu concentrated on gaining funding and acceptance for the program while Avanelle focused on admissions, teaching schedules, and student services. Early students, Michael Holt, Stephen Cromwell, and Glen Combs recall Ms. Myers as forceful and demanding, but always gracious and fair. She was concerned about students' welfare, especially about older married students' ability to obtain decent housing in the community (M. Holt, S. J. Cromwell, oral communication, April 2002). The standard dress code was a white three-quarter length coat, dark blue trousers, light blue shirt, solid blue tie, and black socks for men and similar

attire for women, except a dark blue dress. Students were addressed always as Mr. or Ms. and were expected to attend not only liberal arts courses at the college but also clinical seminars and noon conferences at the hospital. In casual conversation, the Myers often referred to students as “our boys or girls” (G. Combs, oral communication, April 2002).

While attending a conference at Duke in 1968, Dr. Myers asked Dr. E. Harvey Estes, Jr., who chaired the department overseeing the PA program, to send several of the Duke PA graduates to Philippi to serve as role models and teaching assistants. Dr. Estes convinced Bill Stanhope, Roger Whittaker, and Ron Peterson to complete their clinical training at Broaddus Hospital and remain in Philippi after graduation in 1969. Since Duke awarded only a certificate, Dr. Myers’ inducement was a baccalaureate degree. One year of liberal arts study at the college coupled with accumulated course work at Duke and other schools was all that was required. Tuition was free, and they were paid to teach clinical laboratory skills and proctor students in the hospital.

Bill Stanhope recalls fondly being at Alderson-Broaddus College during the PA program’s second year of operation. Although Dr. Myers was in his 60s, he was still an excellent surgeon and in charge of the hospital. Being the first PAs on staff at the hospital caused some minor problems at first. For example, the hospital administrator did not want the PAs eating at the physicians’ table in the cafeteria, and a few nurses balked at taking their clinical orders. Dr. Hu intervened quickly, letting the staff know that he expected their full cooperation. There were no more problems. The hospital was a superb place for the Duke PAs to complete their postgraduate training. The cobalt unit was attracting cancer patients from all over the country, automobile and mining accidents were prevalent, and the indigent population arrived with long-standing medical and surgical problems. In return, the Duke PAs introduced the medical staff to blood-gas analysis and to new life-support procedures learned while students at Duke. At the time, Bill, Roger, and Ron were actively involved in establishing the fledgling American Academy of Physician Assistants started at Duke the previous year. So they quickly got the students at Alderson-Broaddus involved in the national organization (W. Stanhope, oral communication, April 2002).

The unheralded success of obtaining foundation support, the publicity given to the PA program by the state press, the trips that Dr. Shearer and Dr. Myers made to the American Medical Association to promote the concept, and the articles that Dr. Myers submitted to leading state and national medical journals stimulated national interest in the program and concept. When the first class began its senior (clinical) year, the program received a call from NBC asking if they could come to campus to film a 10-minute segment for the Today Show. Paul Cunningham arrived a day before the film crew to lay groundwork for the next day’s interviews and

Figure 2

**Paul Cunningham, Glen Combs, and Shelly Combs
on Steps of Old Main**



Credit: With permission from Alderson-Broaddus College, Philippi, WV.

candid shots of students attending classes and interacting with patients and physicians. Cunningham interviewed Dr. Shearer and Dr. Myers, asking them to describe the role and future prospects for this newest member of the health care team.

As students, Glen and Shelly Combs were filmed on the steps of “old main” where the program’s first offices were located. Glen mentioned his background in nursing. A local general practitioner, Dr. Wallace Murphy, said he could use two assistants immediately and saw no problem with them diagnosing minor acute problems such as upper respiratory tract infections. “Nurses have been doing that for years,” he said. The black and white segment aired on October 20, 1971. After introducing and showing the segment, a young Barbara Walters and Frank McGhee, host of the Today Show, queried Mr. Cunningham about PAs. Will they lower cost of health care? What will they actually do? Does the AMA approve physicians using them in practice? Do patients accept them? How much will they be paid? Mr. Cunningham responded. He doubted that they would lower health care cost but would improve quality of care rendered. The AMA was interested but had not made a “flat statement” of approval. There were too many different types of training programs to develop a definitive opinion. PAs would do what their physicians wanted them to do but would always act under the physicians’ orders or supervision. The role was not yet well defined. Patients that he had spoken with generally accepted the PAs but might mistake them for physicians. Salaries were expected to be nine to twelve thousand dollars per year. Barbara Walters said this seemed low for four years of education, but Mr. Cunningham reminded her that some people valued the opportunity to care for people more than financial awards.⁷

Given the reputation and contribution of the Myers family to health care, medical, nursing, and allied health education, and the little college that proved dreams can come true, it is fitting that America's viewing public were first introduced to the PA concept as it unfolded in the hills of West Virginia. Dr. Hu and Avanelle devoted another five years to the program, retiring in 1976. Upon his death in 1987, it was said, "Hu Crim Myers's life had been a ministry, a ministry of vision, building, education and healing. A man's influence lives not in monuments of stone or steel, but in the lives he touches. This world will always be more beautiful because of the monumental vision, work, and goodness of Hu Crim Myers."³ As a profession, we stand upon the shoulders of giants like Dr. Hu Myers who believed that to do good, one had to be good. He demanded the best and got results; even NBC took notice of his good works.

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