

# PROFILE OF A LEADER

## **Alena Jean MacMaster: Administrator, Educator, Professional Activist And Community Advocate**

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### **Abstract**

This paper profiles Alena Jean MacMaster, an extraordinary nurse leader, activist, visionary and humanitarian from New Brunswick. Her determination and drive were instrumental in fostering the development and progression of health care, nursing education and nursing services at the local, provincial, federal and international levels. "First, loyalty to the institution in which you serve. The patient is the most important person in the entire institution," was Miss MacMaster's guiding principle throughout her career.

In 1909 Miss MacMaster began her nursing career as one of the first graduates of The Moncton Hospital Training School. After gaining valuable experience and expanding her education horizons in the United States, she returned to Moncton in 1919. Appointed as Superintendent and Director of Nursing at The Moncton Hospital, Miss MacMaster's administrative career was constantly challenged by the need for expansion of services due to demographic changes. As the city of Moncton grew, the need for hospital services also increased, along with the demands that new technology brought to the physical structures.

During the difficult economic times of the 1930's and the turbulent war years, Miss MacMaster forged on, meeting the increasing health care needs of military families that flooded into the city. She sought funding from the Fed-

eral Defence Authorities to meet the needs of these people, established a teaching internship with Dalhousie University Medical School and organized a local building fund. Her vision exceeded the boundaries of the hospital compound. As early as 1922 the community at large benefited from laboratory services for public health, and school, venereal disease and tuberculosis clinics.

Her efforts to maintain a high standard of patient care at The Moncton Hospital resulted in full accreditation of the hospital by the American College of Surgeons in 1922. At that time, the American College of Surgeons was the only body that was setting the criteria for excellence in North American hospitals and The Moncton Hospital was one of the first in Canada to be recognized as a standardized institution. When the New Brunswick Hospital Association was formed in 1928, Miss MacMaster was actively involved on committees and within the executive. She represented The Moncton Hospital as a delegate at the inauguration of the Canadian Hospital Council which later became the Canadian Hospital Association.

Miss MacMaster strived for excellence and under her leadership The Moncton Hospital was the only Canadian hospital that received special mention from the American Hospital Association in 1933. This award was for arranging one of the best programs for the observance of National Hospital Day (American College of Hospital Administrators, 1977; Gautreau & Winans-Orr, 1985; New Brunswick Hospital Association, 1934).

As administrator, Miss MacMaster's humanistic values were demonstrated in anecdotes about patient care. A 1937 graduate recalls seeing Miss MacMaster, at night, wearing a wine coloured dressing gown with her hair braided down her back routinely making her way to the floor to console a grieving family (personal communication, 1984).

The responsibility of educating future nurses was embraced and tackled with an innovative and totally involved approach. A 1934 graduate remarks, "Miss MacMaster brought her nurses up to be able to cope with the world" (personal commu-

nication, 1984). Indeed they did. Miss MacMaster's drive was to have The Moncton Hospital Training School on par or superior to other nurses' training institutions of the time. The curriculum was consistently modified to conform to societal changes and needs, reaching out to other institutions as early as 1920, be it in New Bedford, MA, Montreal, PQ or Saint John, NB, for additional clinical experiences for the student nurses (Gautreau & Winans-Orr, 1985). Miss MacMaster ensured the quality of nursing education at the school and it was the first approved by the New Brunswick Association of Registered Nurses (NBARN) in 1930 (NBARN, 1930). While residence rules reflected a paramilitary discipline, Miss MacMaster took the time to personally know each student. A 1947 graduate recalls, When we were to go to the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal, Miss MacMaster called us to her office. She asked Miss M. If she would ever partake of the wines. She asked Miss S if she would ever smoke a cigarette. She asked me if I had the opportunity would I go with a Doctor. She had us all figured out. (personal communication, 1984).

Miss MacMaster supported the value of developing a strong local organization of professional nurses and organized a Moncton Chapter of the newly formed NBAGN in 1920. A mandate for part of the funds raised by the Moncton Chapter was to provide a rest room for the graduate nurses on duty at The Moncton Hospital, to furnish a room for sick nurses and to provide gifts of money to nurses who were ill for long periods of time (NBAGN, Moncton Chapter, 1920).

Dedicated to setting and maintaining high standards for the practice of nursing, Miss MacMaster served on the Provincial Examining Board of the NBAGN and accepted a term as Registrar before becoming the president in 1926 of the newly named New Brunswick Association of Registered Nurses (Gautreau & Winans-Orr, 1985). In this office for ten years, she continually advocated publicly for the mandatory registration of all nurses who were actively employed in nursing (MacMaster, 1936).

As president of the NBARN, Miss MacMaster was also involved with the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) as Honorary Treasurer and was a member of a national committee that examined and reported on the survey of Canadian nursing services that had been completed by Dr. Weir in 1932 (MacMaster, 1930; Weir, 1932). She presented a persuasive paper (MacMaster, 1932) at a CNA meeting regarding the necessity of establishing a Dominion Bureau of Nursing to develop a standardized national nursing curriculum which included a standardized educational preparation of students entering schools of nursing and registration exams.

Concerned during the 1930's that the health of the working poor in Moncton was being neglected because they couldn't afford to pay for health services, Miss MacMaster took charge and began a personal campaign to initiate group hospital insurance. She sought support from NBARN, another local hospital, the business community and from the public. Her dream became a reality in 1937 when the Moncton Group Hospitalization Plan was finalized (MacMaster, 193\_,1937a).

Miss MacMaster's vision was for The Moncton Hospital to provide the best health care possible for the citizens of Moncton. She believed that this would happen if the public became involved in the work that the hospital was doing and that it was her responsibility as the Administrator to set an example of dedication to the hospital for the community to follow (MacMaster, 1937b). She involved herself in the Moncton Hospital Ladies Aid Association and received their support in her efforts to improve hospital services and facilities. The Association raised funds for several large scale projects and for graduation prizes for the nursing students.

There was more to be done. In the fall of 1940, Miss MacMaster invited graduates of The Moncton Hospital to form a Nurses' Hospital Aid for the purpose of providing funding for hospital equipment and to provide entertainment for the student nurses. In her annual report she remarked on how successful the group had been in their

“worthwhile contribution ... augmenting the funds of the treasury of the Ladies Hospital Aid” (MacMaster, 1940).

The year 1947 saw changes in The Moncton Hospital Act and this legislation forced a total replacement of The Moncton Hospital Board membership. In an act of loyalty, Miss MacMaster tendered her resignation as well (City of Moncton, 1947). She then pursued her nursing career in New York State and in Campbellton, NB.

After receiving several life memberships from various groups and organizations in acknowledgement of her contributions to nursing, a final honour was bestowed to Miss MacMaster by the Moncton community. A new diploma nursing school, The Miss A.J. MacMaster School of Nursing, was named in her honour and opened in Moncton in 1974 (The Miss A.J. MacMaster School of Nursing, 1974). During the opening ceremonies, Miss MacMaster delivered her last public address:

*It [nursing] has changed a lot from my day but I'm just as interested as always. There's more opportunity for nurses to day. There's a great need for nurses and even greater need for understanding nurses. Keeping our hearts in the service is very important in this changing world we live in. So if you are going to be a nurse I hope your heart is in it or it won't mean anything... (MacMaster, 1974).*

The Miss A.J. MacMaster School of Nursing graduated 1018 nurses before its closure in 1996. It marked the end of diploma nursing education in New Brunswick, the nursing profession having progressed to an all baccalaureate level of education for nurses (Gautreau, 1998).

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