

Tribute to Lucille Woodville

In 1998 the midwives at Fort Defiance held a celebration of 25 years of midwifery care. Former students and staff midwives came from all over the country. Many shared how much they had learned from the women they cared for. They shared stories of how they have been able to share the strength and grace the women taught them with other women around the country and the world.

This gathering motivated developing a presentation on the history of midwifery in the Indian Health Service. In preparing the presentation Gretchen Landwehr contacted Ingeborg Rathke who shared pictures and stories of starting the midwifery service in Bethel Alaska through the mentoring and encouragement of Lucille Woodville. After receiving the Lucille Woodville award I want to share these pictures and stories with the Nursing category to encourage nurses to have strength and courage in our work.

Lucille Woodville was born in Honduras. She received her basic nursing preparation at the Hotel Dieu School of Nursing in New Orleans, Louisiana. Later she completed her BSN at Case-Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. Her midwifery preparation was at Maternity Center association in New York in 1945-1946.

She joined the Indian Health service soon after it was formed in 1956. In 1964 she became the Assistant Chief of the Maternal Child Health Branch of the I.H.S. Starting in 1964 she prepared several documents recommending the use of nurse midwives in maternity services and newborn care.

She administratively paved the way for midwifery practice by obtaining authorization from the I.H.S. But it was not until 1969 that she found a nurse working in Bethel Alaska who had completed training in midwifery in Britain. Convinced that midwives could improve infant mortality and improve the outcomes of pregnancy Miss Woodville sponsored Ingeborg Rathke and arranged for her to take a refresher course at Brooklyn University Hospital.

She assisted Ingeborg in returning to Bethel and establishing

midwifery care. Besides attending births they started prenatal and family planning clinics.

With the success of the Bethel midwifery service other sites were established including Anchorage, Shiprock, Fort Defiance and Pine Ridge. Many US midwives did their clinical training at I.H.S. sites especially during the 70s and 80s when there were few “full scope” clinical sites where midwives practiced.

Midwifery care is now recognized as the “Gold Standard” by the World Health Organization. Projects around the world encouraging trained midwives to work with communities and traditional birth attendants are just now starting to bring a decline in maternal deaths.

The WHO estimates that 80% of health care around the world can be delivered by nurses. Miss Woodville can inspire all nurses to take action to improve health and quality of life around the world. Along with giving care to patients; nurses can take leadership in health organizations, nurses can encourage, mentor and find positions for other nurses to do innovative work. Nurses can be persistent and use opportunities to find models of care that partner with the population and empower the people served to be healthy.

It is the lives of our children and grandchildren and people all around the globe that we hold in our hands.