Spotlight

Sarah Hall Gueldner, DSN, RN, FAAN
Janice Penrod, PhD, RN; and Susan J. Loeb, PhD, RN

The Journal of Gerontological Nursing is delighted to spotlight Sarah Hall Gueldner, a legend among gerontological nurses. I recently had the good fortune to attend Dementia Day Camp (DDC) IX, a working group of international, interdisciplinary scholars and practitioners focused on best practices and nonpharmacological research in dementia care. DDC was hosted by Linda Buettner, PhD, CTRS, FGSA, of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and Sarah and her family were also in attendance. Sarah’s Southern drawl fit right in at the Haw River, North Carolina, meeting site! As Dr. Penrod and Dr. Loeb discuss in their illuminating portrait of Sarah, I was privileged to receive some of Sarah’s bookmarks with their inspiring messages and to hear stories from Africa around the dinner table. We are all graced by her presence.

Kathleen C. Buckwalter, PhD, RN, FAAN
Editor

Sarah Hall Gueldner, DSN, RN, FAAN

Easily recognized by her soft Southern drawl, gentle affirmations, and silver-white hair streaking through the prominent venues in gerontological nursing, Sarah Hall Gueldner is a champion of gerontological nursing. She is the Arline H. and Curtis F. Garvin Professor at the Frances Payne Bolton School of Nursing at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, and a Professor at the Decker School of Nursing at Binghamton University in Binghamton, New York. Attesting to her accomplishments, she is a fellow of the American Academy of Nursing, the Gerontological Society of America, Association for Gerontology in Higher Education, and the National Academies of Practice.

She has authored more than 100 publications, including seven edited books and monographs. Her work is rooted solidly in personal values and insights that are illuminated in her many editorials and perspective pieces. Most recently, she called for a shift in the prevalent worldview.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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The authors disclose that they have no significant financial interests in any product or class of products discussed directly or indirectly in this activity, including research support.

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Posted: September 22, 2009
doi:10.3928/00989134-20090903-04
from elder friendly to elder essential, noting that:

We must not presume, as we have in the past, that we would know how to make the world elder essential. Rather, we must ask elders individually, and in consensus groups, to tell us what we must do as a society to let them know that they are essential. (Gueldner, 2009, p. 135)

Sarah has given voice to older adults, while working tirelessly to advance the state of nursing science and higher education to close the distance between “us” (as learned health care providers) and “them” (as vulnerable, weak members of society) to reinstate the personhood of older adults as essential members of our society.

THE EARLY YEARS

Sarah Hall Gueldner grew up in the “best of circumstances” for her emergent career in gerontology. Her extended family of three or four generations lived in close proximity and regularly shared meals and time together. Her family home was nestled in a rural community in eastern Tennessee, where neighbors looked after one another and each others’ children. Older people were deeply ingrained in the fabric of Sarah’s early years; they were always around, having fun, and sharing life stories. “Old and young taking care of each other” has stamped an indelible mark on Sarah’s character, and ultimately, on her career in gerontological nursing.

During her formative years, when she was a Senior Service Scout, Sarah attended a career talk given by a local nurse named Margarette Idol. When Ms. Idol asked if any of the scouts were going to be nurses, Sarah responded, “I am!” And the die was cast. Ms. Idol responded, “Well then, honey, you’ve got to go to Memphis…cause they’ve got the only NLN-approved baccalaureate program in the state.” The thought that Sarah would travel more than 450 miles from home to attend college to become a nurse took some time for her parents to digest, but they did.

From that fateful day in her junior high school years, Sarah’s career path was shaped by Ms. Idol, obtain Federal Nurse Traineeship funding for her graduate education for the clinical instructors, and again, Sarah’s career path reached a pivotal point: She earned a master’s in nursing degree from Emory University only 3 years after her baccalaureate degree.

After graduation, she moved back to Memphis to become the Assistant Director of Nursing at the newly opened University of Tennessee Clinical Research Center, joining her undergraduate classmate, Margaret Newman, who was the Center’s Director of Nursing. It was in that position that Sarah first came to learn about both the strict protocols and the extraordinary value of clinical trials. In fact, her first job in her new position was to write an 18-page protocol for collecting perfect urine specimens.

Sarah was married with two young children when she decided to pursue her doctorate degree. She took on traveling to Birmingham, Alabama, while balancing her role as mother and wife with her usual flair. She fondly recalls engaging her classmates in sewing costumes in the dormitory hallway for her daughter’s dance recital. Through her acquaintance with Margaret Newman, Sarah came to know of Martha Rogers’ work and eventually studied with Dr. Rogers. Her doctoral dissertation applied a Rogerian framework in a study of the benefits of rocking on the well-being of older adults residing in nursing homes.

The overarching theme of Sarah’s work in gerontological nursing is to improve the lives

Pictured (left to right) are: Sarah Hall Gueldner, Susan Loeb, and Janice Penrod in academic regalia.

Photo credit: Rob Loeb

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of older adults. Throughout her career, she has sought simple interventions that create big changes in the lives of older adults. Living in the country, Sarah learned that “if it costs a lot of money, you couldn’t do it,” so rather than giving up, she learned the art of recognizing less expensive alternatives. Staying true to the values of her early years and her deep respect for older adults, Dr. Sarah Hall Gueldner emerged as leader in gerontological nursing.

MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS
Research
The cardinal feature of her scholarship is a focus on quality of life within the broad context of the environment. A Rogerian worldview is evident in her work. Sarah fondly recalls her early interactions with Martha Rogers. Although Dr. Rogers declined membership on her dissertation committee, she did agree to meet with Sarah’s committee members to discuss the project design. Sarah smiles and remembers that Dr. Rogers also felt quite free to write on the drafts her papers. For example, Sarah sent her dissertation proposal for review, and Dr. Rogers’ comments were returned promptly. Written over Sarah’s “favorite diagram” was the simple notation: “P-A-R-T-S!!!” From those interactions, Sarah learned that her approach was “too particulate”—a lesson that informed her career trajectory and emerged as the focal point of her work. Her research focuses on the person; however, that person is never considered in isolation of the environment. Referring to the Rogerian notion of energy fields, Sarah is quick to point out that every interaction with another person (i.e., older adult client) dynamically changes the nurse’s energy field. This is a key attribute of Sarah’s approach to science: She is open to lessons that may not be direct findings of a study, but nonetheless shape her views of how to better provide care for other human beings.

Her postdoctoral work on the effects of walking led to a federally funded study of the effect of regular outdoor study on life satisfaction and mood in nursing home residents. This study of a “simple everyday intervention” revealed significant difficulties in administering standard measures to impaired, frail older adults. To address this pragmatic concern, Sarah launched her efforts to design a measure of well-being that could be used with people who could not read or who were too sick or frail to complete lengthy measures. Her subsequent development of the Well-Being Picture Scale (WPS) earned her the Honor Society of Nursing, Sigma Theta Tau International’s Founder Award, the Edith Moore Copeland Award for Excellence in Creativity, in 2007.

An early version of the tool was used to study well-being in mothers of young infants (Hills, 1998), men with traumatic injury (Davis, 1995), and adults older than age 65 (Hindman, 1993; Johnston, 1994). The tool has also been modified for use with children (Abbate, 1990; Terwilliger, 2008). The psychometric properties of the tool were established in a multicultural sample of 1,027 individuals from the United States, Canada, Taiwan, and Japan (Gueldner, Michel, et al., 2005). The appeal of this rigorous, yet simple measurement of well-being has yielded international interest. The tool has been used in studies in Egypt, Africa, Brazil, and most recently, Korea (Kim, Park, & Kim, 2008).

Sarah has begun to examine the tool’s sensitivity for evaluating depression in older adults. In one study, the WPS and the Geriatric Depression Scale were administered to 200 community-dwelling older adults in upstate New York. In another study of community-dwelling older adults seeking care in health clinics in Botswana, Africa, the tool is being administered along with the Zung Depression Scale. Preliminary results from both studies are very promising in demonstrating that this straightforward, non-intrusive measure is a reliable screen for depression in older adults. Simple, yet rigorous—a hallmark of Sarah’s research.

In another body of work, Sarah tackled a special interest that challenged many older adults with whom she interacted: osteoporosis. She championed screening efforts, and as a part of her community outreach activities, more than 3,000 women in the northeastern United States have had ultrasound bone scans. She collaborated with other experts to produce several articles and two books on the subject. The first book was written for a broad audience of clinicians, women with osteoporosis, and concerned family members (Gueldner, Burke, & Smiciklas-Wright, 1999). True to her mission of improving quality of life, this text addressed not only the nature of the disease, prevention, and treatment, but also how to live with this debilitating and often deforming condition. From home safety to adapting clothing, tips for minimizing the effects of this devastating condition on quality of everyday life were offered. In the second book, more detailed clinical guidelines for the prevention, diagnosis, and management of osteoporosis were advanced (Gueldner, Grabo, Newman, & Cooper, 2008).

Creativity
One of the most lasting impressions of Sarah Hall Gueldner is her creativity. She has authored numerous poems and short stories illustrating the nature of the human condition, many of which have been published (Gueldner, 1989, 1994;
Gueldner, Hall, Asbury, & Jacobs, 2005). Sarah said that beyond giving voice to the human experience, these narrative accounts have been used in teaching “to capture, in a different way, the heart of nursing...or the heart of how you are with people.” True to her Rogerian worldview, Sarah is astute to the environment, and by using a quilt, a scrap of old chenille, or another piece of folk art to create an inviting experiential space, she is able to evoke a sensory perception that sustains the effect of her work. Sarah comments that “trying to find new ways of expression is wonderful” but trying to find new ways of knowing by engaging older adult clients in creative expression, such as writing, holds great potential for nursing.

One of Sarah’s hallmark characteristics is her gifting. While in San Francisco, working with international scholars on a book addressing chronic conditions (Poon, Gueldner, & Sprouse, 2003), Sarah and her protégés collected eucalyptus leaves and distributed them as bookmarks on their return home. In January 2000, she collected and shared seashells from the first tide of the new century at her South Carolina beach house. Recently, on return from a trip to Africa, she shared bookmarks that were enlarged sections of an image of her favorite zebra marked with a tribal greeting of “Tsamaya sentle” (Go well) printed on the reverse side. Sarah sent several of these bookmarks, along with the stories she had written about her experiences in Africa, to her former undergraduate teacher, Marie Buckley, who is now in her mid-90s and lives in an assisted living facility. Marie shared the bookmarks and stories with her friends, and it clearly increased the frequency of the group’s dynamic energy field. The bookmarks and stories reminded several of the residents of their own trips to Africa when they were younger, and they wrote to Sarah, sharing their recollections from when they were in Africa. Sarah treasures their handwritten notes.

But the bookmark she has given more than any other, to thousands of colleagues and older adults at home and in many other countries, is a simple one that she has photocopied on cardstock: It says, “Youth is a gift of Nature...Age is a Work of Art!,” a quotation on a birthday card she received from a friend several years ago. These small but precious gifts all carry a message that build a sense of community. Her thoughtfulness abounds and is amplified as others “pay it forward” in their own worlds.

**Mentoring**

“You pass on your self, so you’d rather pass on your better self.” As a mentor, Sarah shines with delight. She never tires of reading student papers and marking drafts with her characteristic “flight plan” of lines and arrows and notes in every margin of the page. Sarah describes “the fun of watching a student ‘catch on’ to something.” Her style is gentle, but her standards are high. She is sought as a dissertation advisor and has chaired 16 doctoral committees and served on 14 others in less than 20 years. One of the lessons she impresses on her mentees is the importance of disseminating their work: “You ought to write that up.” All of her doctoral advisees have published at least one article in refereed journals. It is rare to see Sarah at a conference or meeting without a protégé in tow, making introductions and encouraging active membership in professional organizations.

Beyond mentoring individual students, Sarah has had a significant impact on higher education in nursing. She was instrumental in the start-up of the doctoral programs at The Pennsylvania State University and the Medical University of South Carolina, where she used her experience and “people skills” to build a climate of support prior to launching these successful programs. She has been successful in designing initiatives to increase opportunities for underrepresented students to engage in advanced nursing careers. Perhaps most significantly, she has retained a focus on the preparation of nurses for caring for older adults. She served as co-chair of the John A. Hartford Foundation’s Building Academic Geriatric Nursing Capacity program, providing leadership in the baccalaureate program segment of the project (see Sullivan-Marx & Gueldner, 2006). Her efforts at sustaining academic excellence in gerontological nursing have affected a large cohort of nurses and will ripple into the lives of the older adults for whom they care.

**Global Focus**

As her recognition as a nurse leader emerged, Sarah traveled as consultant to a number of countries, including Pakistan, South Korea, and Japan. These were not short consultation visits; in fact, in 2008, she spent 3 months at the University of Botswana as a visiting scholar. Enjoying the immersion into new cultures, Sarah shares her expertise in Rogerian theory, teaches in graduate programs, and perhaps most important, builds relationships with colleagues across the globe. These international visits echo the worldview that permeates her work: From each experience, both she and her new colleagues emerge as changed beings, with new insights that influence all future interactions. From the close-knit neighborhood in the mountains of Tennessee to the other side of the globe, Sarah has blazed a trail of scholarship that few can claim.

**IN CLOSING**

We have both known Sarah since embarking on our own doctoral educations at The Pennsylvania State Uni-

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versity in the late 1990s when Sarah was Director of the School of Nursing and Chairperson for each of our dissertation committees. During the course of the past decade, she has made many positive and lasting marks on our careers. From things as simple as teaching how to deliver a podium presentation at a national conference with grace and aplomb despite failed technology to supporting students through sensitive situations that could thwart their educational path, Sarah has taught us (and others) to be considerate of our fellow human beings. She has taught us to be focused and thoughtful in planning our careers, while being open to serendipitous opportunities that could change the course of our lives. Sarah’s presence is sensed and her wisdom is recalled in how to put forth and pass on one’s “better self.”

REFERENCES