

**Maureen Neus Leahey '70**

**Acceptance Speech**

**Alumni Day May 3, 2025**

Hello Everyone,

What a wonderful fulsome introduction, Bobbie. Thank you, thank you! It's an honor and a pleasure to be here with you all today to receive this 2025 Distinguished Alumni Award.

It's meant a lot to me to be honored by my alma mater, by Cornell.

Since being told I was to receive this award I've been reflecting a lot about my professional and personal life these last 55 years. Bobbie has outlined many of my accomplishments so I thought I'd take a more personal view and speak about

**Who and Where would I be if I had NOT attended**

**Cornell University- New York Hospital School of Nursing?**

Some of you from the Classes on '68,'69 and 70 will remember me as Sister Maureen Neus. In December '69 during my last year at Cornell I left the Dominican Sisters of the Sick Poor, a small Catholic order dedicated to nursing and serving the poor in the United States.

Had I not attended Cornell I never would have had the opportunity to meet so many dedicated caring knowledgeable teachers who set the bar high for us students to deliver competent compassionate nursing care. The impact of being with these faculty members and my fellow students opened me to the idea that there were many ways to serve the poor. Going to Cornell was a positive life changing experience for me and for many of my classmates.

We had many outstanding role models such as Doris Schwartz, Jo Ann Keith, and Joe Muzio each having inspired me professionally and personally. Hearing Doris talk about the importance of community centered health care and the value of sensitivity to patients' and clients' culture influenced me to work in St Luke's community health center in Manhattan upon graduation and then later in Pediatric Home Care at Jacobi Hospital in the Bronx. Jo Ann Keith championed advocacy for mental health clients and sincere respect and understanding for

their situations. This fostered my passion for competent positive mental health care both in the programs I managed and in my own clinical private practice in marriage and family therapy. Joe Muzio connected the dots between human ecology, current events, and political issues. I recall having written a paper on the epidemiological issues at Resurrection City, a tent encampment in Washington DC erected during the protests of the Vietnam War.

There were five nurses in my family but I was the first to attend a university program. My mother, aunt, and a cousin who served in WW11 in the Navy were all proud nurses as was another cousin, a year younger than myself. Sometimes they didn't understand why I was so excited to be working with interdisciplinary teams to provide community health care. Wasn't nursing sufficient? This was a question I often heard. But gradually they too learned what I had learned at Cornell to value the tremendous potential of working collaboratively for the benefit of the patient.

I recall an experience I had working in a pediatric unit as a student at Cornell. During report each nurse was expected to relate what they had done with the child's family during that shift. These interventions were recorded in the child's chart. That always impressed me how seriously family involvement was taken in that unit. In my own administrative work I threaded the concept of family from job postings, to hiring interviews, to staff orientation, to clinical supervision, to performance appraisals. Family nursing was integral to our clinical practice.

### **Where would I be if I had not gone to Cornell?**

While at Cornell I met my husband a Canadian who was almost finishing his PhD in meteorology at NYU. After graduation we moved to Calgary, Alberta, Canada where we lived for 40 years. I embraced the rise of the family therapy movement there and specialized in both marriage and family therapy and in teaching nurses how to involve families in health care. It was a tremendous gift to be able to have one foot in the nursing profession and the other foot in the discipline of marriage and family therapy. I tried to capitalize on the synchronicities between them.

Now retired and having turned 80 last year, I continue to be actively involved in fostering community health through my volunteering with Communities in Bloom. Our aim is to grow healthy communities, foster engagement and enhance civic

pride. It's a joy to lead a team of committed volunteers engaged in fostering a more healthy lifestyle.

But perhaps the best answer to where and who would I be if I had not gone to Cornell is the fact that I would not have been able to help my husband deal with his gastric cancer which has metastasized to his liver and lymph nodes. Without my nursing knowledge, ability to advocate for him, and awareness of how to navigate the healthcare system he and I would not be where we are today. In February this year after having undergone 10 chemo and immunotherapy treatments he was given 3-6 months to live. We are grateful to have this time together and I am grateful to Cornell for teaching me the importance of holistic care.

Thank you so much to Bobbie Mildenburger my delightful classmate and friend for having nominated me for this award and to Sandra Savard Gooding, our class secretary, for facilitating my nomination. Linda Saal has been a wonderful guiding hand and resource throughout this process. I'm deeply grateful to her and her team.

Carpe diem!