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A spoonful of humor helps the medicine go down

With “wit and caring,” retiring Health Service Director Dolores Helm treated IWU students for 33 years.

By Rachel Hatch

Dolores Helm is smiling. It’s something she does often — a signature trait Illinois Wesleyan students know well. As director of the Arnold Health Service on campus, Helm’s smiles are often the perfect anecdote for what ails students.

Today, however, Helm’s smile is directed at an old, black-and-white photo of herself. “Nice hat, huh?” she says with a laugh. The picture shows Helm chatting with a student patient. Her nurse’s uniform is pressed and perfect, all the way up to her white hat.

Long ago, Helm replaced the uniform with slacks and a pink lab coat but her essential job of caring for students hasn’t changed much in her 33 year-career at Illinois Wesleyan, which she is concluding this spring when she officially retires. “I will miss it,” she says, sitting in her Health Service office in Magill Hall. The office is neat and precise, like Helm, with shelves filled with photos and awards — including the University’s Max L. Starkey Service Award, presented each year to a staff member for extraordinary service to the University, which Helm won in 2004. “Working for a college is probably the best job in the whole world. You get all the benefits of watching young people grow up — and none of the bills.”

A giant pill was a prop for the above shot of Helm taken for Illinois Wesleyan’s 2004 staff Recognition Banquet, where she was given an award for her “extraordinary service.” During April’s inaugural ceremony for President Wilson, Helm received another honor when she was asked to give greetings on behalf of the University’s staff. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Wisecracking humor is one of Helm’s trademarks. Jokes are just one of the ways she puts her patients at ease. “It sounds cliché, but empathy oozed from her,” said Craig Southern ’85, who saw Helm often when he was a student. “She gave me allergy shots for five years, and, I have to say, she made it an enjoyable experience.” Southern remembers complaining to Helm about not being able to run quickly because of his allergies. She looked at the 19-year-old and deadpanned, “Well, it’s because you’re old. It’s all downhill from here.” He still laughs at the line. “Her wit and caring made it easier.”

As a former IWU hall director, Southern — who is now an associate dean for campus life at Knox College in Galesburg, Ill. — also saw how Helm cared for other students. “Whether it was an eating disorder or a simple cold, people felt comfortable coming to her,” he says.

Helm smiles again when asked to share stories from her more than three decades at IWU. Patient confidentiality requires her to keep those stories to herself, but her sly look when asked reveals she probably has some doozies. She resists, but acknowledges the temptation, laughing as she scolds herself: “Not good, Dolores. Not good.”

Respecting her patients’ privacy is just one of the ethical standards she first learned from her father, Dr. Jay W. Helm, a doctor in the small town of Gridley, Ill., where she grew up. Dr. Helm never discussed his cases with his wife or three daughters. “One of the only reasons I knew he was a physician is because the phone rang constantly,” says Helm. Other medical professionals in her family included her mother, two aunts, and a sister

— all nurses. “I wanted to be a nurse ever since I can remember,” Helm says.

After graduating with a bachelor’s degree in science from Eastern Illinois University and a master’s in science from Illinois State University, she completed the registered nursing program at Methodist Medical Center in Peoria. It was her first job in 1969 at Mennonite Hospital in Bloomington that led her to Illinois Wesleyan.

“When I worked the E.R. at Mennonite, the Wesleyan students would come in when health services was closed,” Helm recalls. “I always found the students a delight. Really interested in getting well. I thought to myself, ‘I wonder if they have an opening.’” She submitted her resume and was hired as an assistant university nurse in 1972. When she was promoted in 1978, the title of University Nurse became Health Service Director.

University Health Service first opened its door for students in 1942 in a former women’s lounge in Hedding Hall. When Hedding was destroyed by fire in 1943, the service shifted to several locations, finally moving into Magill’s basement. The late Velma Arnold, after whom the Health Service is now named, was the first university nurse and held that position until her retirement in 1971.

“I heard she ran a tight ship,” Helm says admiringly of Arnold. After her retirement, Arnold returned for many visits to Health Service to bring magazines for the lobby or receive her flu shots. When Arnold got older and couldn’t navigate the steps, someone drove her to a nearby parking lot where Helm or one of her assistants administered her shots as she sat in the car.

“Oh, those steps!” says Helm with a laugh. “It was so dark and steep, I don’t know how sick students made it down there.” When Health Service was remodeling in 1999, the steps also got a needed makeover. More significant than these visible changes, however, are the ways Health Service has adapted its approach to dealing with students over the course of Helm’s tenure.

“When I started, people expected the typical ‘Say-ahh-take-this-and-you’ll-get-better’ approach,” says Helm. “So many people were used to listening to a doctor say ‘Hmmm’ and hand them medicine to make it all better. It took people some time, but they began to take a more active interest in their own care. And that’s good!”

These days, students are more comfortable and candid in sharing their concerns — physical and mental — says Helm, who first meets new students as they turn in their immunization forms and medical records. “I get to meet all the students as they come in the door.” Helm and her staff see, on average, 50 to 70 students each day. “We see everything from allergy injections to the stomach flu,” says Helm. “But sometimes a lot of folks just need to come in and talk about a personal concern.”

A few years back, Helm began to notice that increasing numbers of students had mental and emotional problems listed in their records. “It’s part of a nationwide trend,” says Helm. “People are more open to talking about their problems now, and often get treatment in secondary schools.” She releases an empathetic sigh. “Young people today are under so much more stress than I ever was in my youth.”

Helm began keeping track of the number of times a mental health problem was listed in a student’s record.



The above photo, taken in the 1970s, is one of Helm’s mementoes from her three decades tending to the physical and mental health of the University’s student body. “She understands what matters to students,” says Dean of Students Jim Matthews. *(Photo provided by Dolores Helm)*

“Numbers only, no names, of course,” said the privacy-conscious Helm. After 11 years of gathering data, Helm felt it was time to act. She presented the information to the Dean of Students office and asked for a counseling center.

“We always had a counseling center within student affairs,” says Dean of Students Jim Matthews, “but it dealt with time-management and study skills. Dolores grew that program into something bigger. She educated us all.” After bringing the center under Health Service in 2001, she pushed for a separate Counseling Center director. “She kept it at the forefront,” said Matthews, “because she understands what matters to the students.”

Helm is known across campus for her devotion to the students and her kind manner that sets them at ease — whether pushing students to wash their hands to stave off germs or making “house calls” to students too sick to make it in to Health Services. According to Matthews, in a recent student survey, Health Service ranked the highest in satisfaction among campus services. “I think that is directly linked to how students feel about her,” Matthews says of Helm.

“Dolores likes the students. She likes us, and so she becomes part of our lives,” said Debra Staack Southern ’85, Craig’s wife, who knew Helm when she attended IWU. Southern, associate dean of students at Knox College, also became a hall director and friends with Helm. “As students, we always joked about having to go deep down into the basement of Magill to get well, but it was always fun there,” Southern fondly recalls.

“She always makes light conversation, especially when something is worrying a student,” agrees Keyona Jarrett ’06, a student worker at Health Service.

“When I think of Dolores, I think of her as a healer,” says Matthews. “I have no doubt she will remain in health care. It’s what she does.”

When she retires, Helm says she might, indeed, like to keep her hand in the nursing profession, but this time as a teacher instead of a practitioner. “I know I just cannot do the ordinary retirement of gardening and travel,” she says. “I need to keep busy for my own mental health.” Helm’s three children all live out of town, but she helps to care for nearby relatives and says she will devote more time to them.

Another sigh escapes her lips as she considers the prospect of leaving Illinois Wesleyan “I will miss it,” she repeats, shaking hands as the interview ends. Her smile returns. “It was nice to meet you. *Now go and wash your hands,*” she adds with a wink.