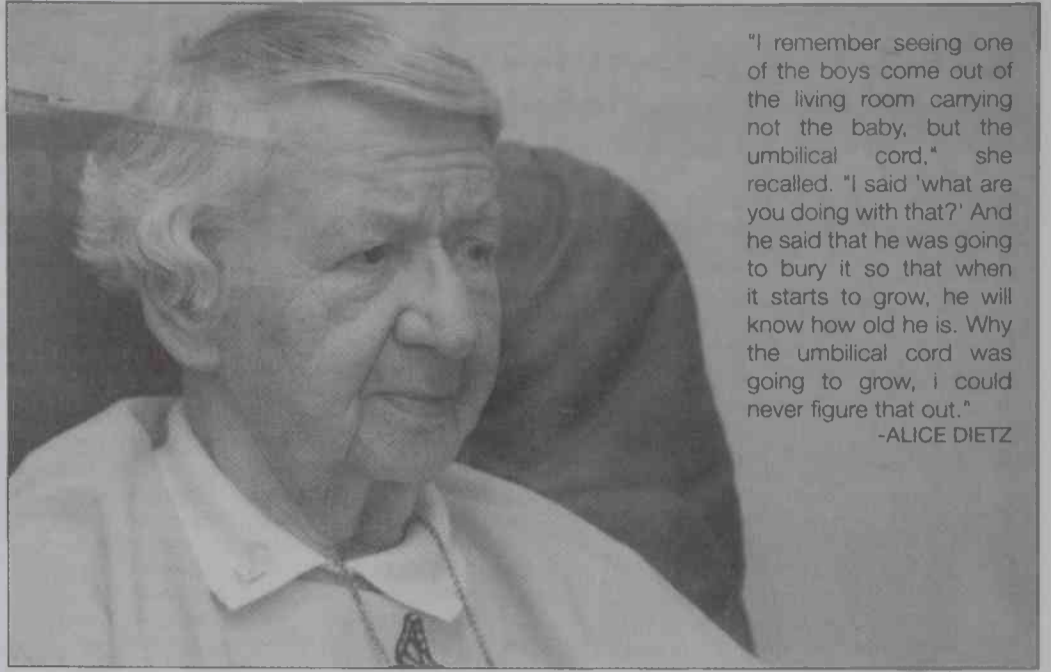


PROFILE

TWIN LAKES:

Alice Dietz



Shown above: Alice Dietz sitting in her apartment at Twin Lakes.

"I remember seeing one of the boys come out of the living room carrying not the baby, but the umbilical cord," she recalled. "I said 'what are you doing with that?' And he said that he was going to bury it so that when it starts to grow, he will know how old he is. Why the umbilical cord was going to grow, I could never figure that out."

-ALICE DIETZ

Melissa Kansky
Multimedia Editor

Although raised in an orphanage, Alice Dietz, 88, is no Annie Warbucks. She created her own life story, allowing the unexpected support she received to guide her ambition. She was called by the Lutheran Church of America to establish the collegiate nursing program in Africa.

The woman sat in a plush chair with her feet elevated, a requirement because of her formerly broken knees. She wore an emergency button around her neck in case she falls and appeared small beneath two fleece blankets. Her fragile appearance did not reflect the strength her past connotes.

Gratitude for the orphanage

Amid the self-produced paintings and woodcarvings that clutter the walls of her Twin Lakes apartment, the wall across from her chair hosts a certificate granting her residence at the Evangelical Lutheran Orphanage in Philadelphia. The certificate states that she will remain at the orphanage until her 18th birthday in exchange for domestic labor. A baby picture and a photograph of her and her older sister sit in the frame as well.

"I was an indentured person," Dietz said. "A slave."

Despite her servitude, she considers herself blessed in her connection to the orphanage. With the absence of parents, Dietz found faith and inspiration from an unconventional source.

"My faith became strong through my association with the Lutheran church, and I stayed with it all my life," Dietz said. "They have always cared for me."

After her mother died during child birth with Alice, her father left her at the orphanage in Philadelphia.

When she was 7 years old, her father remarried and reclaimed her. For one year, she lived with her father and stepmother.

"She was fine, but my relationship with my father was not a good one," she said. "I ran away from home when I was 8 years old."

Finding her own way

She had a ticket for the Philadelphia subway and rode the subway the entire night. She found a home with a couple related to her stepmother and worked in their grocery store until she graduated high school.

"Someone was always there to help me," she said.

While sitting in her lounge chair, she reminisced about riding in her uncle Harry's truck to purchase vegetables to sell at the store. She also recounted delivering the food and earning twice the expected tip.

Every Friday, Dietz would deliver cod fish cakes to the local Catholic church members. She would knock and announce herself as a delivery boy, and a woman would reply that she was really a girl and hand her twice the tip.

The makings of a nurse

This routine continued throughout high school, but after she graduated, Dietz joined the nurse aide program at the women's medical center in Philadelphia.

"I had a marvelous instructor in nursing preparation, and she convinced me to pursue nursing," she said. "She said 'you got to go full-time.'"

In order to attend the nursing aid program Dietz needed to walk eight miles everyday. While walking home she experienced a pain in her side. She saw a policeman, and he brought her to Lankenau Hospital.

"They treated me so good," she said. "That's what made me become a nurse: the care they gave me. I was going all the way with this one."

Upon completion of the nurse aide program, Dietz attended a three-year program at the Lankenau Hospital School of Nursing. Although she had not yet gone to college, the school of nursing admissions board pressured her to contribute to the Lutheran Church of America mission and establish a collegiate nursing program in Liberia.

"I had gone to a nursing camp and one of the mission lords spoke to the people in the camp and said every mission board has a mission that is sort of at the bottom of the barrel," she said.

Liberia was considered to be the neglected mission, she said.

"I vowed never to go to Liberia," Dietz said.

Initially, she had wanted to go to east Africa and establish a program in Tanganyika, but in order to go to Tanganyika, she would not have been able to work in association with her church. She would have to be "on loan" to another Lutheran church.

She received the most encouragement from the two pastors at the orphanage, she said. Her religious faith and loyalty provoked her to accept the mission to Liberia.

"They really wanted to get the collegiate nursing program going, and I finally agreed," she said. "I'm never sorry that I went."

Planting the seeds in Africa

In 1960, she traveled to Liberia as a nurse and a missionary to establish a collegiate nursing program, but when she arrived in Zorzor, Liberia, all the students were in eighth-grade.

"They couldn't go to a college program because they were only eighth grade graduates," Dietz said.

The program took a detour. Dietz flew to various parts of the nation and interviewed different students to survey the interest in a nursing program.

"The girls were definitely interested but wanted to go to college first," she said.

To appease the residents, Dietz worked to establish a nursing program in an already developed Episcopal college: Cuttington College. She approached students from different villages who would be eligible to attend.

"My primary job was to train the students," she said. "I remember going down and we had only three boy nurses at the Zorzor hospital. There was no curriculum, no set of what they were trained to do."

Some of the practices confused Dietz.

"I remember seeing one of the boys come out of the living room carrying not the baby, but the umbilical cord," she recalled. "I said 'what are you doing with that?' and he said that he was going to bury it so that when it starts to grow, he will know how old he is. Why the umbilical cord was going to grow, I could never figure that out."

Prior to Dietz's arrival, the nursing students would make formula for the infants at the Zorzor hospital. Students were called to observe doctors in the middle of the night because there were no formal classes.

The hospital consisted of multiple mud huts and 30 beds and did not contain toilet facilities or running water. A picnic table and chairs constituted the classroom. The hospital had a book from 1937 about courses in America that a nursing program should include.

The doctors of Zorzor were expected to structure their nursing program according to the book published in 1937, she said.

"I had to set up a curriculum and a set of courses they would take," she said.

She communicated with National League of Nurses in New York City to devise an effective curriculum.

"I did set up a curriculum," she said. "Much against the feeling of a doctor because he wanted to keep authority. But the board said Alice Dietz is in charge."

Dietz directed the nursing program at Cuttington College and was later appointed dean of the nursing program.

"The male doctor had authority over the patients," she said. "And I had authority over the nurses."

While developing a program, Dietz traveled to recruit students who were about to graduate from high school to enroll at Cuttington College. Four individuals enrolled, three females and one male.

She recruited faculty as well. Faculty members had to have at least one degree higher than the students.

The responsibilities continued to increase. Dietz was expected to help plan the building of a new hospital while trying to run the nursing program.

"By 1962, the new Phebe Hospital was open," she said. "It was open two miles across the road from Cuttington College and those first four students were enrolled in the nursing program as freshman."

During her 10 years in Africa, she witnessed an outbreak of small pox. Dietz, along with the other doctors, vaccinated residents, but she was not allowed to enter the Bush School, a secret society, and vaccinate the children studying there. Graduates of the Bush School entered the



Dietz shows photos of her experiences in Africa where she started a nursing program at the Zorzor hospital at Cuttington College.

village and administered the vaccinations.

"When they came out, there was a big celebration," she said.

Dietz retrieved a wooden board from her front hall closet. The board contained photographs from Liberia, many featuring the joyous occasion. She carefully pointed to the images she had earlier described. The sepia tones pictured bare-chested woman rejoicing.

She explained that such dress was the norm.

A plaque given to Dietz over a decade after her mission in Liberia hangs in the front hallway. The woodcarving symbolizes Dietz and the first four nursing students. Although all five people are nude in the illustration, Dietz guaranteed that she "never once went naked."

Returning to America

Despite the cultural difference, Dietz said it was more difficult to adjust back to American culture than it was to acquaint herself with African culture.

"It took me two years to adjust to America," she said. "I kept wishing I was back in Africa."

Once back in America in 1970, she studied at UNC-Chapel Hill.

"I had been in Africa for 10 years, and I didn't want to go back to Philadelphia where it's dirty snow all the time," she said. "So I came down here to get my masters degree at UNC-Chapel Hill."

She earned another masters in nursing at UNC, which qualified her to teach at Duke University, but when Duke terminated the nursing program, she returned to UNC. She taught at Duke for seven years and then worked at UNC for another seven.

"They made me feel very welcome," she said. "They said I was a born again Tarheel."

Despite the acceptance she received from UNC, her heart belonged in Africa.

A witness to progress

She returned in 1988 and spoke at the Phebe Cuttington College nursing program graduation, but she did not recognize the program she had left. The program that initially contained four students had grown to include 100 students.

"I made something up and suggested they stay put," she said, "because some were fleeing to other countries."

She struggled to remember more details concerning her speech and second experience in Liberia.

"Don't ask me to remember," she said. "It was so long ago. I have to stretch my memory."

Settling down

Her tale jumped back and forth between America and Africa until her mind returned to her Twin Lakes apartment. She again expressed gratitude for the care she has been given.

"I like the people here very much," she said while gazing out of her third floor window. There were no birds pecking at the bird feeders, so Alice Dietz moved her hand to her stuffed kitten laying on the table. "They have been really wonderful to me."