

IN MEMORIAM

Renilda Estella Hilkemeyer

Renilda Estella Hilkemeyer, RN, BS, DrPH, an internationally recognized pioneer in the specialty of oncology nursing and a tireless advocate for patients with cancer, died on June 10, 2006, in Houston, TX, at the age of 90. She will be remembered for her “can do” attitude, her beautiful smile, her sparkling eyes, and her wonderful laugh.

Hilke, as she was fondly known, was the first director of nursing at the then-University of Texas M.D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor Institute in Houston, serving in the role from 1955–1977. She then was promoted to assistant to the president of M.D. Anderson until her retirement in 1984. Hilke was brought to Houston from Columbia, MO, by R. Lee Clark, MD, who asked her to become the director of nursing as well as develop an educational program in cancer for nurses. The curriculum she developed not only helped the nursing staff learn to care for patients with cancer but also brought nurses from around the world to the institution. She established a Foreign Exchange Nurse Visitor Program to provide both classroom and clinical training for nurses from outside the United States.

Oncology nursing was still a new specialty when Hilke came to Texas. She worked with the staff to develop procedures for managing complex patient care and empowered the nursing staff to remain colleagues of the physicians yet practice independently. She designed and developed the postoperative care unit for surgical patients, worked tirelessly with staff on techniques for managing patients’ pain, and helped with the development of the first ambulatory infusion devices for the delivery of chemotherapy. She worked with pharmacy to train and educate the nursing staff in the mixing and administration of chemotherapy and helped plan and implement the first outpatient clinic for patients to receive that chemotherapy. Hilke was always in the middle of everything, ensuring that nursing representation was “at the table” when any activity involving patient care was discussed.

Knowing that nurses had other priorities at home that affected their ability to work, Hilke identified the need for on-site child care in



the Texas Medical Center. She established a daycare facility in a small building in a parking lot across from the hospital in 1963. By 1981, the Texas Medical Center Board of Directors named the new YMCA-sponsored childcare center in her honor. There wasn't a dry eye in the house when the children sang songs of appreciation in Hilke's honor at the dedication ceremony.

Hilke received countless awards during her years in oncology nursing, including Nurse of the Year from the Texas Nurses Association; the American Cancer Society (ACS) Distinguished Service Award; the Distinguished Merit Award from the International Society of Nurses in Cancer Care (ISNCC); an honorary doctorate of public service degree from her alma mater, St. Louis University; the ACS National Nursing Leadership Award; and the Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) Distinguished Service Award, to name a few. She published numerous articles in national and international journals and was a consultant to many oncology organizations and facilities.

Hilke was recognized for her knowledge and expertise not only by the oncology community but also by other organizations. She

received the Outstanding Houston Professional Woman's Award from the Federation of Houston Professional Women and, in her later years, the Volunteer of the Year Award for service to Braes Interfaith Ministries.

Hilke was one of a kind. When she was the director of nursing, she never let anyone tell her no. She supported the nursing staff “to the wall,” helping improve the tools and techniques used to care for patients. She promoted professional organizational involvement from ACS, the Texas Nurses Association, ISNCC, and ONS.

Once Hilke actually did retire, she continued to contribute at M.D. Anderson as a volunteer, wearing her blue volunteer jacket with pride. Her other joy in life was participating in the Braes Interfaith Ministries Food Bank. She convinced Houston Lighting and Power to let the ministries start a community garden on a utility right-of-way, thereby providing fresh vegetables for more than 4,000 families.

Hilke was an outstanding mentor for both of us as well as for the nurses with whom she worked. She encouraged and championed our involvement in the Texas Nurses Association and ONS. She was one of the most professional, dedicated, kind, and genuine people with whom we have ever worked. Her interest, support, and friendship have had a direct impact on our careers in oncology nursing.

The last time we visited with Hilke before her death, she still had those sparkling eyes and brightened our day with her smile. We, among many, are better people for having known her and will miss her greatly.

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