

# A legacy of helping others

When Vera McIver moved to Victoria she helped revolutionize the care of seniors in long-term facilities

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Times Colonist

When Prairie nurse Vera McIver moved to Victoria in 1965, she brought a desperately needed revolutionary spirit with her.

Her compassion and courage helped change the fate of countless frail elderly people who were treated more like prisoners of war than residents of long-term care homes.

They got their meals on trays in their room — a room that might have a dozen other people sharing it and lights on much of the time. Strict visiting hour signs were posted on the walls, pets and children seldom seen. Women's purses were put in storage, their owners catherized to prevent accidents with the bedding — all “needless degradation,” McIver later said.

“That’s what she saw and that’s what she changed,” says Jeanette Funke-Ferber, a former vice-president of nursing at Juan de Fuca Hospitals, and a cousin of McIver — who died May 31. “Up to that point in time, nowhere in Canada and the world were they treated as unique human beings with something to offer and give back,” she says.

Along with winning the gratitude of care-home residents from Victoria to New Zealand and Japan, McIver received the Order of Canada in 1986, for insisting they be “treated as normal individuals rather than as sick patients,” in the words of the governor general’s office. She also was awarded the Queen’s Jubilee Medal in 2002 and saw a National Film Board documentary made on her method developed at the Priory in Colwood called *The Priory: The Only Home I’ve Got*.

“She was a tremendous risk-taker,” says Funke-Ferber, who worries, as did McIver in recent years, that her hard-fought progress has been sliding due to financial constraints.

McIver was born in 1916 in Saskatchewan to Joseph and Christina Dombowsky, who emigrated to Canada from Russia in 1904 seeking free land to farm. She followed in her father’s foot-



Vera McIver receives the Order of Canada from Gov.-Gen. Jeanne Sauvé.



McIVER FAMILY



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Top: Vera McIver as a nursing graduate. Above: Vera McIver and husband John in the 1970s.

practice she gleaned as a so-called suitcase farmer.

She met her husband, John, a former P.E.I. potato farmer, in Victoria, where she had moved in 1950. But from 1954 to 1965 the family spent the growing season farming in Saskatchewan and winters here, where McIver worked as a nurse.

It was her sister, Elizabeth, a nun who needed help managing the Priory who set in motion McIver’s legacy. McIver rose to the challenge in 1967, when women were standing up for what they believed in. She gave her recipe for success to the *Victoria Times* 30 years ago: “You had to be serene enough within yourself and be gutsy enough to make things stick.” She self-published the story of her Priory Revolution, with Funke-Ferber and Jesse

Maybe it was all the course of the night,” her daughter Ruth recalls with a laugh. “The shocked look on the poor girl’s face — she was just absolutely flabbergasted.”

about this and she made the nurses be nice to me,” she said in her eulogy.

Wells called McIver “a model of how to take what life throws at us and then to throw it back new and improved.”

She always spoke plainly. After an evening gathering for Order of Canada recipients in Vancouver, a staff member at the posh hotel where she stayed inquired how she had enjoyed her visit. Her reply: “You have a lovely facility here but I’m very surprised at the sound-proofing... Let’s put it this way, I could hear every grunt and groan [next door] and I know how many times they made love during the

mean” nurses who tended to her as a pre-schooler when she had her tonsils removed. “I guess I complained to Auntie Vera

Mantle, a founder of the Canadian Gerontological Nursing Association.

After her husband died in 1985, McIver became the archivist for the Roman Catholic diocese of Victoria. She brought to light historical documents and artifacts not just about church affairs but about the history of B.C. — at one point, the diocese stretched to Alaska.

She volunteered 20 years of her life to sorting through thousands of unfiled documents dating back to 1846 stuffed in two dozen boxes, says Monsignor Michael Lapierre. “Without Vera, we would still be a way back with boxes.”

She brought a necessary passion to the job: “For Vera, every little piece of information was precious,” he says, noting that many authors relied on the data she retrieved, such as Margaret Horsfield, author of *Voices From the Sound*.

Her faith was of primary importance and she took the message to love others to heart — with dignity and generosity, he says. “She was an amazing woman.”

Upon her death, she made sure the St. Vincent de Paul Society gave her car to a family in need and hoped mourners would donate to the poor rather than send flowers.

She always said “the Holy Spirit came to her” to propel her groundbreaking work at the Priory, Ruth recalls. “The day she died was the feast of Pentecost, which was the feast of the Holy Spirit.”

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Vera Elizabeth McIver was born May 11, 1916, in Avonlea, Sask., and died May 31, 2009, in Victoria.

*Island Lives* is a weekly series celebrating the lives of Island people who have died recently. The series focuses not on the famous, but on our neighbours who have led interesting lives or made a difference in their communities. If you know of someone whose life should be celebrated, let us know by e-mail at [features@bc.carwest.com](mailto:features@bc.carwest.com) or by mail at 2621 Douglas St., Victoria, B.C., V8T 4M2.

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