

Science and Conscience

The Uses of a Liberal Education

By De Villo Sloan

Because Wells is one of the nation's oldest women's colleges, it is not surprising that early graduates were among the first women to enter many fields that had been previously the exclusive domain of males, including professions related to science. Throughout the 20th century, as knowledge has accumulated and new opportunities have opened for women, Wells graduates have continued to be pioneers. As the following profiles indicate, a liberal arts education has instilled in them a curiosity that has enriched their lives as well as a social conscience.

Dr. Nancy

In 1898, **Nancy Blanche Jenison** received her A.B. from Wells and then taught high school several years before attending medical school at Johns Hopkins University, which had just begun to admit women and offered generous scholarships. According to her profile in *American National Biography*, she had a lifelong devotion to the theory and practice of ethics, and she decided she could alleviate more suffering as a doctor than as a teacher.

At the age of 35, she was licensed to practice medicine and opened an office in New York City. Her sister, **Madge C. Jenison** (another Wells woman), also lived in the city. For two decades, Nancy managed a thriving pediatric practice. Her relationship with patients, mostly women, was such that she frequently received personal letters reporting on their conditions and the events of their lives. She must have been deeply gratified when she received pictures of many children who were growing, healthy, happy, and had fond memories of "Dr. Nancy." In 1931, she retired from her practice.

When she was 66, Nancy went to Mexico City to study at the National School of Anthropology. Her new interest led her to conduct research on her family, and she made a discovery that was deeply troubling: Her ancestors had owned slaves. She believed in equality for women. By extension, belief in the equality of African-Americans was only natural. True to her character, she decided to do something about it; and she soon relocated to Washington, D.C., to support the cause.

She joined the Washington Ethical Society in 1950, and it became the center of her activities for the rest of her life. Part of a larger national movement, the society encouraged community activism to advance social justice. Through the ethical society, she served as a physician to children living in poverty.

When her sister became ill, she returned to New York City to care for her. In 1960, soon after Madge's death, Nancy



Nancy Blanche Jenison, Wells College Class of 1898.



Left to right: Mary Lou Lehmann Peterson '57, Dillu Ashby '57, and Nancy Dye Robinson '57.

also died. Because she lived so simply, few realized that she had amassed a considerable fortune. Her will established a scholarship fund at Johns Hopkins University for talented women medical students and provided generous funding for the Washington Ethical Society.

On the Road

With \$120, sleeping bags, and delivering a convertible which they did not know how to drive, **Dillu Ashby '57**, **Nancy Dye '57**, and **Mary Lou Lehmann '57** set out on a cross-country trip to San Francisco shortly after graduation. They slept in campgrounds and cooked over an open fire. By the time they reached Reno, Nevada, they were low on funds, so they washed in a stream, put on dresses, and went to gamble in a casino — luckily coming out money ahead.

They arrived safely, and while none of the three had ever been to California, they found the place to be as magical as they had imagined it would be. Mary Lou went to live in Big Sur. Nancy began working for a Nobel Prize-winning chemist at Berkeley. Dillu, a biology major (and disciple of **Miss McMullin**), took a job as a receptionist at Standard Oil. Fortunately, she quickly put her Wells education to work.

She found a scientific research position at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF) and at the same time enjoyed the Bohemian atmosphere of North Beach where she encountered Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, among

others. After she was married, Dillu moved to Big Sur and then began working at the Stanford Medical Center in the radio isotope lab. “I loved that job. Nuclear medicine is a fabulous career for a science major because your undergraduate education enables you to understand the processes, and you are fully appreciated as a professional.”

Dillu acquired so much knowledge and experience in the field that she returned to UCSF to teach physicians the fundamentals of nuclear medicine. From there, she went on to work in the area of nuclear medicine patient care. Then, using her leadership skills, she moved into healthcare administration. “I was always interested in what makes an organization run and how the bills are paid,” she explains.

At the age of 45, Dillu headed off to graduate school at the University of Minnesota — one of the nation’s top health care administration programs. “Going back to school in midlife is a great experience. It was easy for me because I never stopped going to school. I kept taking courses after I graduated from college. I give Wells credit for that; a liberal arts education made me curious.” She did a residency at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and then went to the University of Wisconsin Hospital in Madison to administer outpatient programs. Her choice to move to the Midwest is not as incongruous as it sounds: Dillu was raised outside of Chicago. (Her mother, **Dillu Loyd Ashby '23** graduated from Wells, as did her sister, **Nancy Ashby Mavrogenes '49**).

California, however, is her adopted home; and she eventually returned to take a position as outpatient specialist at Childrens Hospital Los Angeles where she concluded her healthcare career. Dillu is now devoting herself to another interest: primatology. She has studied the subject at UCLA and USC and is a docent at the Los Angeles Zoo, sharing her knowledge with new generations. She is also a docent at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

A Venture Capitalist

Opportunities for women with backgrounds in science and who have intellectual adaptability instilled by a liberal education have never been greater. The life and career of **Karin A. Gregory '80**, vice president of the Massachusetts Technology Development Corporation (MTDC), exemplifies this brave new world. “I am trained in science, public health, management, and law. I have the ability to apply all of these in my current capacity as a venture capitalist,” she says.

NO-NONSENSE ADVICE AND NEW CURES

Ruth Barnhart '23 has the distinction of being remembered as the first woman physician in the city of Roanoke, Virginia. She dedicated her life to pediatrics. Her patients developed a deep appreciation for her no-nonsense advice and first-rate care.

Her education reflects intellectual breadth and far-reaching interests that can, at least partially, explain her success in the art of medicine. Ruth graduated from Wells with majors in French and history and subsequently received her medical degree from Cornell University.

Florence K. Fitzpatrick '25 used her education to find cures for some of the most dreaded diseases that plagued humanity. During World War II, she was a central figure in the successful effort that produced the typhus vaccine used in the immunization of U.S. troops. Subsequently, she worked on the development of drugs used in the treatment of tuberculosis

At Wells, she majored in chemistry and biology and was one of only three science majors in her class. She studied at Harvard Medical School and earned a doctorate in chemistry from the University of Pennsylvania.



A turn-of-the-century science lab at Wells.

Created in 1978, the MTDC is a state-sponsored, leading edge venture capital firm that funds promising new companies in Massachusetts that are in the early stages of development and in need of support. In the last 20 years, the corporation has invested more than \$45,000,000 in 106 companies. Industries included in MTDC's portfolio are innovators in computer software, the Internet, telecommunications, industrial automation systems, biomedicine, and environmental management. Karin oversees a third of the organization's portfolio.

She reports that only 5% of the funds invested by any U.S. venture capital firms, including MTDC, went to women-owned businesses last year. "I am working within my business community to raise awareness and help women to succeed. I believe that women think differently from men and that you need both in any organization or business to run it efficiently. In Boston, there are only about 30 women active in this field."

Karin was a bio-psychology major at Wells who interned with Nobel Laureate Salvador Luria at M.I.T. and at the Roswell Park Cancer Center in Buffalo. "These internships gave me a great look at

my career options, gave me contacts in the industry, and great hands-on experience." She earned a master's degree in healthcare administration from Boston University and a law degree from Franklin Pierce Law Center. Before joining MTDC, she was director of the division of epidemiology and immunization of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, chief operations officer and corporate counsel of the Trustees of Health and Hospitals, Inc. of Boston, and functioned in those capacities as an administrator and attorney. She also had the opportunity to represent institutional healthcare clients in private practice for eight years.

At the age of 24, she was appointed administrative director at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute, where she had been working as a researcher and getting a master's degree at night. When asked what it was like to hold an important leadership position at such an early age, she said, "Hard. But I learned with mentoring from senior managers and through experience. I made a lot of mistakes."

Karin attributes much of her success to the education she received at Wells and to her parents. "My parents, my mom in particular, were very supportive of my choices; but it was the foundation that I built from the time spent at Wells that has helped to form my opinions and beliefs. Wells gave me the tools to be confident and to take risks that have enabled me to set goals for myself." 