

Wilk Honored with Susan B. Anthony Award

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By Heather Larson Poyner
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Joan Wilk recently imagined what it would have been like if contemporaries Susan B. Anthony and Florence Nightingale had had a chance to talk to one another.

"I would like to think they would have written or spoken on women's rights and health care," Wilk said.

For more than 20 years, Wilk has served as a nurse and educator in the Kenosha and Milwaukee communities. Following in the footsteps of women leaders she most admires, Wilk has been named this year's recipient of the Susan B. Anthony Award.

(Wisconsin Attorney General Peg Lautenschlager presented Wilk with the award at the 13th annual Susan B. Anthony awards dinner held in Kenosha in March.)

Wilk took time from a busy day at the Shalom Nursing Center recently to describe some of the many activities that brought her to the attention of the award committee.

On this day, she was meeting with several seniors from the University of Wisconsin-Parkside / University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee consortial nursing program. Each had been doing clinical rotations in the Kenosha area. Two of the women had just finished rotations at the prison, another was working with Kenosha Hospice and two others were working at the Shalom Nursing Center.

Wilk observed to the group, "You're really getting a great view of the community."

She was born to Jac and Eleanor Ramsey in 1941 in Alpena, Mich. She received her bachelor's degree in nursing from the University of Michigan.

After marrying Michael Wilk, she moved to Kenosha where they raised their two children, Deborah and David.

Wilk worked as a clinical nurse in Kenosha and eventually returned to school for advanced degrees in nursing. Between 1980 and 1986, she obtained a master's degree at UW-Milwaukee and a Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin.

After she received her Ph.D., she left teaching to establish the UW-Parkside / UW-Milwaukee consortial nursing program – which she coordinated from 1988 through 1995.

Wilk also helped establish the Shalom Nursing Center in 1991.

"The goals were to provide health care to those without access to it, and provide the nurses with the experience of this population," Wilk said.

Providing medical services and health education to the homeless was a new service to this area.

And it has been valuable to the student nurses. "A hospital setting is high tech, but working here gets them out of thinking that for every problem there is a high-tech solution," she said.

As a teacher, Wilk's philosophy is straightforward.

"The basics are still the basics: to do the best job you can to promote health and teaching and work with people who are very sick," she said.

Wilk currently teaches two nursing classes at UW-Milwaukee and acts as associate professor and director of the master's nursing program there.

She was a founding member of the Kenosha Hospice Alliance, the Mary Lou Mahone Endowment Fund, and the Kenosha Youth Development Services (now Kenosha Human Development Services).

As for her other interests, Wilk said, "It sounds cliché but I really do like to travel with my husband and spending time with our family."

Asked what she would like the next generation of nurses to know, Wilk said: "That they can really make a difference in people's lives ... I would also refer them to the philosophy of Florence Nightingale. She said that nursing was about the therapeutic use of self. In other words, (nursing) is about how to use ourselves in service."



Joan Wilk