

A KNIGHT FROM MISERICORDIA

There are many notable people among those who have been staff, students or volunteers at Misericordia. One of these is Sir Ronald De Witt, a graduate of the 1970 class at Misericordia School of Nursing who grew up in Flin Flon, Manitoba. Sir Ronald was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 2002 for his meritorious service to Nursing and health care in the United Kingdom. Receiving a knighthood is one of the highest honours a person in the United Kingdom can receive.

So how does a nurse receive a knighthood in the United Kingdom? Well, first, you have to be recognized as making a significant contribution nationally and internationally. One glimpse at Sir Ronald's career shows that he certainly meets these criteria. He has received many honours in his career because of the contributions he has made. He holds an honorary doctorate and an honorary professorship from two universities.



Sir Ronald has led several important changes in health care in New Zealand and the United Kingdom that have improved access to and the quality of care that patients receive. He was one of two nurses to hold a senior leadership position in the National Health Services (NHS). He was selected as one of “the brightest and most talented managers” in the NHS to develop primary care trusts and support attempts to improve NHS performance as the government changed the way it financed health care to provide local budgets run by frontline staff. In recent years, Sir Ronald was appointed head of a new agency in Britain to run the £1bn a year courts system, a position he says allowed him to advocate for consideration of how the courts systems and policies affect health and vice versa.

It might surprise you to learn that little of Sir Ronald's career has been planned. Instead it has been the result of his openness to the suggestions of mentors and his

thirst for finding ways “to make a small difference in the world.” One example of this was his entry into Nursing. He had always intended to become a history teacher; however, when he worked one summer as an orderly in the Flin Flon Hospital, a nun suggested he become a nurse. He mentioned this to a nurse he worked with, a 1959 Misericordia graduate, Inge Huber. She replied that he had the attributes of an excellent nurse and should consider it. The next day, she brought in a paper with the address of Misericordia School of Nursing. He wrote a letter of application that day, August 15th. Two weeks later he entered the school. Sir Ronald said, “It happened so fast that no one in my family had any idea.” Heather Crockett, a childhood friend, entered the School of Nursing at the same time and was amazed to see Sir Ronald in her class.



Sir Ronald is very appreciative of the influence of Misericordia in his career. He says the caring and compassion that are the values of Misericordia have been the hallmark of his career. “Patients always come first.” He has remained friends with a number of his classmates; they continue to influence him.

Sir Ronald’s nomination for a knighthood came as “a complete surprise” to him. He found out he was being considered for knighthood when he went to the mailbox one “ordinary” day and found a letter from Tony Blair, the then Prime Minister. The letter said that he “had a mind” to nominate to the Queen that a knighthood be awarded. The letter cautioned him not to tell anyone as the nomination had to be presented to the Queen and “the Palace might not approve.”

Sir Ronald admits to “feeling stunned.” He reread the letter “because I had to be sure I had read what I thought I read. And sure enough, that’s what it said.” Then

he had to wait several weeks before he read in the London newspaper that he was one of about a dozen men to receive a knighthood.

Shortly before the actual event, Sir Ronald rehearsed his part in the knighting ceremony with the Lord Chamberlain. During the actual ceremony, a citation about his contributions were read aloud and Queen Elizabeth II dubbed him on both shoulders with the Knighting sword. He was declared officially as Sir Ronald De Witt. He describes this as “the biggest honour of my life and the highlight of my career.”

Sir Ronald retired from active service in 2007. He remains busy in his hometown, Hove, in which he is the Chairman of the Town Association. He enjoys being at home with his two dogs. He has consulted internationally, particularly in Croatia, Ukraine and Romania, about how the courts can operate outside of political



influences. He is asked frequently to be a mentor to less experienced nurses and health care managers; he says he enjoys mentoring “immensely.” Sir Ronald also worked with several charitable organizations, particularly LEPROA UK, an international charity devoted to the prevention, education, and rehabilitation of people with leprosy and other communicable tropical diseases. This work has entailed many visits to countries, such as India,

to discover how best to help people with leprosy to combat the physical, economic and social hardships associated with this disease.

Sir Ronald’s commitment to the welfare of others and his passion for making a positive difference is an example to us all. We are proud to call him one of our Misericordia Alumni. The Misericordia Heritage Collection has more information about Sir Ronald, such as his resumé (curriculum vitae), newspaper articles, and photographs. If you are interested in seeing any of these, please contact us at 204-788-8321 or Bapaterson@tru.ca.