



Lifelong friends support research

Two women who grew up knowing most of Marshfield Clinic's earliest physicians haven't forgotten their roots. Although they now live elsewhere, they have continued supporting Marshfield Clinic and its research efforts.

Joellen Abbott Bennet and Marbeth Miller Spreyer have been friends since first grade at the old Washington School, now the Washington Square shopping area on Marshfield's south side. Ironically, it is directly across the street from the original Marshfield Clinic building (photo at left), expanded by the construction firm co-owned by Bennet's father, Clark Abbott.

Both women headed east to college and never returned to live in Marshfield. But their financial support has remained strong, capped in 2012 with a generous donation from Spreyer that created the Steve J. Miller Distinguished Physician/Scientist Endowment in Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety Research.

Spreyer's father, Steve J. Miller, was a cheese wholesaler in Marshfield and was well known to

dairy farmers and cheesemakers throughout Wisconsin. The Steve J. Miller Recreation Area was donated to the City of Marshfield by his family.

Spreyer, 84, of Virginia graduated from Smith College in Massachusetts and earned her law degree from Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. She started her legal career in 1956 with the U.S. Department of Justice as the first female appointed to the Department under the Attorney General's program for honor law graduates. In that role, she wrote briefs and argued cases before various U.S. Circuit Courts and a few state Supreme Courts, including the Wisconsin Supreme Court. After a hiatus from law practice to raise her family, Spreyer spent 29 years in private practice as an estate planning attorney before retiring.

She returns to Wisconsin each summer to visit Bennet, who now lives in Hazelhurst, Wis. Both women are members of the Doege Legacy Society, which recognizes donors who have named Marshfield Clinic as the beneficiary of a planned gift. Both women have also been regular donors to Marshfield Clinic, even though neither of their families had direct connection with the Clinic.

My parents knew all the original doctors at the Clinic," Bennet said. "That included Dr. Karl W. Doege, whose house was kitty-corner from ours." The Doege Legacy Society is named for him. Spreyer's father knew many of the Clinic doctors as well and was interested in supporting research, as far back as the 1940s.

"He always said, 'only in America could I achieve what I have.' He believed in giving back to the community."

Bennet's father, Clark Abbott, co-owned Thomsen Abbott Construction Co., which built a number of commercial buildings in central Wisconsin, including additions to the original Clinic building on South Central Avenue. In one meeting with Clinic leaders, found in Clinic archives, some of the doctors "absolutely guaranteed that the Clinic would never have more than 55 physicians." (Abbott knew better. Marshfield Clinic now has more than 700 physicians at more than 50 locations in Wisconsin.)

Joellen Bennet has been a patient of Marshfield Clinic for most of her life and has made many gifts to the Clinic in support of research. Her late husband, Daniel Hagge, was an executive with the former Wausau Insurance Companies. Although she lived in Wausau for 35 years before moving to Hazelhurst, she too maintains an interest in her hometown.

"My maternal great-grandfather came to Marshfield in 1887 with Governor Upham to run the store for the sawmill, and his wife and my great-grandmother were sisters," she explained. "My paternal grandfather, Dr. Andrew Abbott, came to Marshfield in 1905 and was the town's first veterinarian. His barn is still standing along East Fourth Street, a half block off South Central Avenue. So if I was going to be interested in any community, it would be Marshfield."

Spreyer and Bennet were obviously gifted students but remember being challenged by their classmates. One of them was Wolfgang Epstein, son of Stephen Epstein, M.D., the Clinic's first

dermatologist and clinical researcher. It was also noteworthy that four of them - Epstein, Spreyer, Bennet and Mark Hansen – all went east to college, which they believe had never occurred before with Marshfield High School graduates. Hansen, who Bennet said was "absolutely brilliant," finished third in his class at Harvard and first in his class at Harvard Medical School. He went on to become a professor at the University of Wisconsin Medical School.

"Marshfield was a wonderful place to grow up," Spreyer recalled. "It was very safe; the worst peril going to Joellen's place was crossing through Adler's pasture, rolling under the barbed wire fence and avoiding the cows and cow pies."

Spreyer also recalled that, with no fancy restaurants, parties were held in neighbors' homes. "Someone gave a party every night between Christmas and New Year's Eve, and that's what I thought life was like.

"I still have feelings for Marshfield," Spreyer said. "There's just something about your hometown and the place where you grew up. And I like the idea of supporting farm research. My father's business could not have existed without the dairy farmers."

