



MSHS outstanding alumnus

Ron Caulk: Advancing nurse anesthetists around the globe

The Mayo School of Health Sciences Recognition of Outstanding Contribution award honors alumni of MSHS programs whose contributions are exceptional in one or more of the following areas: clinical care, research, mentoring and education, or humanitarian endeavors. This year's recipient is Ron Caulk, Nurse Anesthesia Program, 1962, who served as executive director of the International Federation of Nurse Anesthetists prior to his retirement in 2004.

Ron Caulk's positions as president and executive director of the International Federation of Nurse Anesthetists took him around the world. But his passion for the field began in his own backyard.

"Growing up, one of our neighbors was a nurse anesthetist and that sparked my interest," says Caulk, who began working at Mercy Hospital in Des Moines, Iowa, when he was 15 years old.

"I started running the elevator on weekends and became a surgical technician by the time I graduated high school," he says. When word leaked that Caulk was applying to nursing school, he was encouraged to apply to the Mercy Hospital School of Nursing — even though the school had never enrolled a male student. Caulk became the first and was the sole man among 60-some classmates.

"It was a lot of fun," he says of his experience as a trailblazer.

At Mercy, Caulk met a neurosurgeon who had completed his fellowship at Mayo Clinic and encouraged him to apply to Mayo's nurse anesthesia training program. Caulk did and was accepted. "Mayo had such a good reputation, and I knew I would have opportunities for experiences there that I wouldn't have elsewhere," he says. "I also knew the institution's reputation would open doors. The words 'Mayo Clinic' were like two magic words. And they still are."

After graduation, Caulk worked for two years as the sole anesthesia provider at Sacred Heart Hospital in Fort Madison, Iowa. He then became the chief nurse anesthetist and director of nursing service at Hoemako Cooperative Hospital in Casa Grande, Ariz. His last position in Arizona was as a staff nurse anesthetist at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Phoenix, Ariz., where he practiced for 12 years.

Advocate for nurse anesthetists

While in Arizona, Caulk began his career-long involvement in professional organizations.

"I always knew I wanted to be involved in my profession," he says. "I felt I needed to become an advocate for nurse anesthetists."

Caulk became a member of the Arizona Association of Nurse Anesthetists, serving on various committees before becoming president in 1968. His leadership in the Arizona organization led to positions in the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists (AANA). He was elected president of that organization in 1977.

Following his AANA presidency, Caulk followed his heart and returned to the Midwest.

"I fell in love with a nurse anesthetist and moved to Chicago to be with her," he says. That nurse anesthetist became his wife, Susan, who was the director of continuing education, certification and

recertification for the AANA until her retirement in 2006.

In Illinois, Caulk was assistant director of surgery and allied services at St. Francis Hospital in Peoria, and taught clinical anesthesia courses at Northwestern University Hospital. He also continued his involvement with the AANA and served as the organization's representative to a planning committee for an international symposium of nurse anesthetists.

This would become a defining appointment for Caulk and the profession. After the success of the first International Symposium for Nurse Anesthetists, held in 1985 in Lucerne, Switzerland, many members of the planning committee were eager to establish an international organization. Caulk had reservations about the endeavor.

"I had my doubts about whether an international organization would fly," he says. "The language barrier alone made planning extraordinarily difficult."

The AANA urged Caulk to survey the international community to determine a direction for the

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—MARIAN KWANSA



potential organization. The results revealed a remarkably uniform set of goals: international standards for clinical practice and anesthesia education, educational opportunities and international recognition.

This unity of purpose convinced Caulk that an international organization had value, and he devoted an increasing amount of time and energy to the fledgling group. In 1989, the International Federation of Nurse Anesthetists (IFNA) was officially established, with Caulk as its first vice president. He assumed the presidency the following year and held the position until 1995, when he was named the organization's first executive director.

The organization saw tremendous growth under Caulk's watch. "The IFNA began with 11 national nurse anesthesia organizations and today it has more than 40 national nurse anesthesia organizations as members," he says.

From Ghana to MSHS

Caulk traveled extensively in his roles with IFNA, helping to raise awareness of the profession worldwide. His travels also helped broaden the horizons of many nurse anesthetists. Marian Kwansa was one of them.

Whether caring for patients, advancing the role of nurse anesthetists around the globe or learning about Native American cultures, Ron Caulk's focus has been the same. "It's all about the people, the relationships," he says. "That's what's most rewarding."

Kwansa, a graduate of the Mayo School of Health Sciences nurse anesthesia program and a nurse anesthetist at Mayo Clinic, first heard Caulk speak as a student at the only nurse anesthesia program in her native Ghana. He later wrote a letter of recommendation to accompany her application to graduate school.

"Mr. Caulk's visit was a revelation to the scope of practice in the United States, which was beyond what I was accustomed to," she says. "His visit made all the nurse anesthetists in Ghana aware of the practice in other parts of the world, which started us doing educational networking internationally and enhanced our scope of practice."

When Caulk visited the Ghanaian school that Kwansa attended, he brought some textbooks as a gift. The school's response overwhelmed him.

"They had only one textbook for the entire school," says Caulk. "The textbooks I brought were like gold coins." The discovery prompted Caulk to initiate a used textbook donation program through the IFNA, which has sent much-needed textbooks to Israel, Palestine, Cambodia and numerous African countries.

In 2004, Caulk retired from the IFNA. He and Susan moved back to Arizona, where they've become active volunteers for the Heard Museum, which is dedicated to Native North American cultures and art.

"It's a lot of fun to be doing something new," says Caulk. "I work in the gift shop and get to meet the artists when they bring their art in to sell. I love it." 

