



**NORTH PARK
UNIVERSITY**
CHICAGO

Dr. Wilma Elizabeth Peterson Biography

Born in Saskatchewan in Western Canada on March 3, 1921 to Joseph and Mary, Wilma Elizabeth Peterson grew up on a small farm about two miles outside of the town of Norquay. She was the youngest of five children: Lille Maria “Lillian,” Arthur “Philip,” Joseph Halvard and David Walter. The family with Swedish roots raised some livestock and also harvested grains. “It was a rugged life,” as Wilma described it: there was no indoor plumbing or electricity; water came from a well and had to be carried into the house; ice would be stored in an icehouse and brought into the house’s ice box when needed.

A main focus for the family was their Covenant faith, and the Bethany Covenant Church in Norquay was a center of family life, from community gatherings to weekly Sunday school. Some services were still said in Swedish, which Wilma could speak throughout her life. Another focus for the family was education. Homework was a serious endeavor among the children each day, done around the dining table with a gas lamp providing light.

It was a traumatic experience in Wilma’s life that first inspired her future vocation. In the fall of 1928, the family had moved to be with other family near what was then the town of Cleburne, Kansas - about 40 miles north of Manhattan, KS in the Blue River Valley - in an effort to improve their situation. They were also able to worship at a Covenant Church in town. However, it was in the spring of 1929 that Wilma’s sister Lillian suffered a ruptured appendix. Doctors operated, but no antibiotics were available. For six weeks, Lillian was sick, however seemed to be improving. Lillian was sitting up in bed, visiting with her mother and father and siblings, sometimes in a rocking chair when she felt up to it. She was the eldest among the siblings, Wilma recalled, and a well-liked, serious and mature young woman.

During that time, the family hired a live-in private duty nurse who helped care for Lillian around the clock. Miss Hanson had earned a nursing diploma and even inside the home worked in an all-white uniform, including shoes, stockings and a starched hat with a black velvet band, indicating her degree. Her formidable presence made a significant impression on young Wilma, who was seven at the time. “There is one role model fixed in my mind,” Wilma recalled. “The nurse was very professional and I think she was very helpful to mother and dad.”

However, likely as a complication of the ruptured appendix, Lillian developed a lung infection. Although the doctors tried to undertake a procedure to help her, they were not successful. “We knew as children that our sister was not long for this life,” Wilma recalled. Over a period of days, Lillian slipped into unconsciousness and passed away at the age of 16 on May 5, 1929.

During that time, it was the family's faith that sustained them. "It was a very sad time but it was also a great time of dependence on scripture and prayer," Wilma recalled.

In 1932, the family moved back to Canada, where her father had an opportunity to return to the farm where the family had lived before. Through the years, Wilma had other exposure to other nurses, one a good friend of her mother's and another cousin who became a nurse in Kansas City and encouraged Wilma to go into the profession.

So, in 1942, Wilma became the first member of her family to go to college with a nursing career as her goal. Her family was supportive of the move, as they believed it could bring in a better salary than other careers for women at the time, such as teaching. Wilma was also celebrated by the town. "The year I left for college there were only two of us from our little village to go to college, so it was very historic," Wilma remembered.

When Wilma arrived at the University of Saskatchewan in the city of Saskatoon, she was one of 13 women in the entire university of about 2,000 students. As was customary at the time, Wilma lived in a family's home, where she had her first exposure to living with indoor plumbing, electricity and even an electric refrigerator. "It was a big change," Wilma recalled. "We enjoyed having those facilities." In 1947, Wilma graduated with a bachelor's of science from a five-year nursing program at the university, with a major in biology and a minor in nursing. She undertook her clinical rotations at Regina General Hospital in Regina.

It was teaching both when still a nursing student and afterward for a year at the University of Saskatchewan that Wilma discovered a love for instruction. As a student, she was part of a hospital rotation that would teach new mothers in the ward techniques for everything from bathing to feeding their newborns. As a graduate, she began to instruct other nurses. "That's when I discovered I loved teaching," Wilma recalls. "I think the sharing of information was really important as it related to the care of our bodies and care of the newborns. So when I graduated I took a job that involved classroom teaching. Then it broadened that I was teaching straight sciences, such as anatomy, physiology and pharmacology."

It was the love of teaching and the acquisition of knowledge that spurred Wilma to pursue her master's degree at Boston University. In 1953, Wilma graduated with a master's in nursing education with a minor in the care of children. During that time, Wilma returned to Canada to work at The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto as a nursing administrator who was charged with student nurses.

In 1955, Wilma moved to Chicago where she had some relatives, and also to work at Swedish Covenant Hospital where she would both practice and teach student nurses. This was a time period before North Park had its own nursing school and educating future nurses was the responsibility of the hospital. Wilma spent eight years in Chicago, where she became her department's second in command as a nursing education administrator. During this time, Wilma cherished living among fellow Swedish Covenanters once more, worshipping at North Park Covenant Church and also taking classes from time

to time at what was then North Park College. It was also during this period of her life when she became an American citizen.

In 1963, Wilma moved to Washington state, where she worked for two years in the state Department of Health as a nursing coordinator. In 1965, she went to Pacific Lutheran University as an assistant professor.

But Wilma remained restless and desired to continue her education further. In 1972, Wilma moved to Arizona to begin doctoral studies at the University of Arizona, which she completed in 1977 in biology with an emphasis on human physiology. There were few doctorates in nursing available at the time. Her dissertation was about the body's regulation of temperature. "I was just fascinated by the amount of knowledge that was out there. There was always more that could be learned and could be shared," Wilma recalled. "It was something that gave me great satisfaction. I guess it boils down to having the knowledge to share with other people. That's a very important thing in life."

After earning her PhD, Wilma made her final move to Oregon where she finished her career with more than 14 years as an associate professor at the Oregon Health Sciences University.

It was during this time when Wilma began to think seriously about her philanthropy. While Wilma had always tithed, she had never made a large gift outside of what she believed to be a religious obligation. It was actually an investment that she no longer wanted which spurred her first major gift. Several years before, in the late 1960s, she and some friends had bought nearby lots on riverside property on the outskirts of Tacoma. However, now settled in the Portland area, Wilma no longer desired to own or build on the property. The problem was the prospect of capital gains for property that was now worth 30 times more than what she originally paid for it. Working with a representative from North Park, she decided to donate the property to the school and therefore eliminate her capital gains while also realizing a tax deduction. What she did not anticipate with what began as a purely practical, business oriented transaction was the pure joy she experienced making such a significant gift. She even added to that gift with her own funds to establish two robust endowed scholarships – one for the Nursing school and one for the Seminary – in her name.

"It was such a positive experience and a sense of personal growth to be able to release something that had appreciated so much and to feel good about it," Wilma recalled. "The sense of well-being and what you feel personally frees you up to take other giant steps."

Among Wilma's giant steps since then, which she decided upon just a few years after her first gift, was a planned gift commitment to give most of her estate to North Park University. Her generous estate will establish two endowed faculty chairs in both the Seminary and the Nursing School. She continued to make large gifts as an annual donor as well.

In 1991, at the age of 70, Wilma retired, but remained busy as a master gardener and with several volunteer jobs. One of her volunteer jobs was as a certified volunteer ombudsman with the State of

Oregon Office of Long Term Care where she would visit nursing homes, assisted living centers and foster homes to ensure they were following rules and regulations to protect the vulnerable residents. Over the years, Wilma also developed a love for doll collecting and the restoration of antique dolls, starting with one that was owned by her mother.

When Wilma moved to Oregon in 1977, she bought a modest split-level home in Beaverton, OR for \$46,000. Until recently, at the age of 97, Wilma drove her beloved brown 1991 Honda Accord. She attended First Presbyterian Church in Portland, although she remained committed to her Covenant heritage and faith. Wilma passed away after a long life of service on March 16, 2020.

Wilma considered her philanthropy to North Park University to be one of the great pleasures of her life, and a meaningful reflection and result of her life's work, which will help future students in both the Nursing school and the Seminary for generations to come.