

A
REFLECTION
ON

Claire Fagin

Honoring the life and work
of this visionary leader



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THE NURSING PROFESSION lost an accomplished and visionary leader with the passing of Claire M. Fagin in January at the age of 97. Fagin's leadership abilities were widely recognized in nursing scholarship and beyond, with many awards, honorary degrees, and even a stint as a university president. Her remarkable career was memorialized with obituaries in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, as well as with a shout-out on CBS Sunday Morning.

In a 1983 editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Fagin and coauthor Donna Diers described nurses as “tough, canny, powerful, autonomous, and heroic”—a description that epitomized Fagin, who over the course of her career emerged as a transformational leader in nursing practice, research, education, and advocacy.

Fagin's early work was in pediatrics, particularly in the care of children with mental health issues. She initially worked with pediatric patients at Sea View Hospital, a dedicated tuberculosis hospital on Staten Island in New York City before moving to the adolescent psychiatry unit at the city's Bellevue Hospital. After earning a master's degree in psychiatric nursing, she joined the pediatric psychiatry unit at the Clinical Center of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, where she became the first director of children's programs.

Subsequently, as chair and professor of the Department of Nursing at Lehman College in New York City from 1969 to 1977,

Fagin developed a new baccalaureate program to prepare nurses for primary care practice. Her support of teaching physical assessment skills to undergraduate nursing students, controversial at the time, is now standard in nursing school curricula. From Lehman College, Fagin moved to the University of Pennsylvania to head the School of Nursing. Over her tenure as dean from 1977 to 1992, she transformed the school into a world-renowned center for nursing scholarship. She did this by establishing primary care programs, integrating faculty practice throughout the Penn health system, and emphasizing faculty support and development. Along the way, she launched the first doctoral program in nursing at an Ivy League institution. Her leadership did not go unnoticed.

In July 1993, Penn's trustees selected Fagin as the university's interim president, the first woman to lead the university. Fagin went on to head the John A. Hartford Foundation program Building Academic Geriatric Nursing Capacity, which transformed the specialty of geriatric nursing. Today, more than 300 nurse scientist graduates of the program are making their mark on gerontology research, practice, and education.

Fagin's contributions have been honored with numerous tributes, including eight honorary doctorates. In 1988, the American Academy of Nursing (AAN) bestowed on Fagin its highest honor, naming her an AAN Living Legend. And, in 2006, Penn's School of Nursing building was renamed Claire M. Fagin Hall to acknowledge her exemplary leadership.

Several principles guided Fagin's work in every role she undertook: democratic participation, empathy, nurturing/development of peer relationships, and activism. Here are some examples of how they played out in her work:

Democratic participation. As Penn interim president, Fagin inherited a campus fractured by accusations of racism, assaults on academic freedom, and other conflicts. To address these issues, she established a Commission on Strengthening the Community to promote an academic environment where all members could learn from and be enriched by their similarities and differences. This required soliciting a wide range of opinions and much deliberation about how to foster a culture of respect, inclusion, and freedom of expression. The resulting reforms laid a foundation for better understanding among interest groups in keeping with Penn's core values.

Empathy. The ability to recognize and understand different viewpoints was critical to developing the interpersonal competence that Fagin deployed in her various leadership roles. She was dubbed "The Healer" during her term as Penn's interim president. And while these expert interpersonal skills aided Fagin in leadership roles, it was her personal impact on nurses and others she worked with that made her beloved.

Many who knew Fagin have a "Claire" story—an interaction with her they remember as profound.

Nurturing/development of peer relationships. Fagin consciously learned from others and sought to foster that spirit of collegiality, so as to help all realize their potential. Marvin Lazerson, interim provost at Penn while Fagin was interim president, said she was always pushing those around her to achieve more. "She helped me live up to incredibly high standards as the interim provost, often kicking and pushing me," Lazerson said in an interview with Penn Today.

One of us—Jane Barnsteiner—recalls a conversation with Fagin when Barnsteiner was considering applying for membership in the AAN. Fagin quickly disabused her of the idea that she should wait for someone to invite her to join. "You need to get out there, talk with someone to sponsor you—and take the lead," she urged. "Nobody's going to tap you on the shoulder."

Barnsteiner took the advice to heart and convinced several Penn colleagues to do likewise. Barnsteiner and four of her fellow Penn Nursing faculty members were subsequently inducted into the AAN in 1991, the largest cohort from a single nursing school at that time. Fagin viewed such successes in others as a measure of her leadership, remarking in her 2000 book, *Essays on Nursing Leadership*: "The extent to which I have built leaders around me dictates my success."

Activism. Fagin's recognition of the importance of activism and the use of evidence to support policy recommendations

was rooted in her 1964 doctoral dissertation, "The Effects of Maternal Attendance During Hospitalization on the Behavior of Young Children." Her findings of the negative effects on hospitalized children of rules that barred parents from visiting received national attention and led to changes in attitudes and policies about parental presence in pediatric facilities, including in the ICU and during resuscitation events.

Fagin's advocacy ranged widely, including issues such as nursing home reform and health care payment reform. She wrote a landmark report in 2001 for the Milbank Memorial Fund, *When Care Becomes a Burden: Diminishing Access to Adequate Nursing*, which highlighted the decline in the availability of nursing services in hospitals and provided recommendations for corrective changes to regulation, licensing, and financing of services.

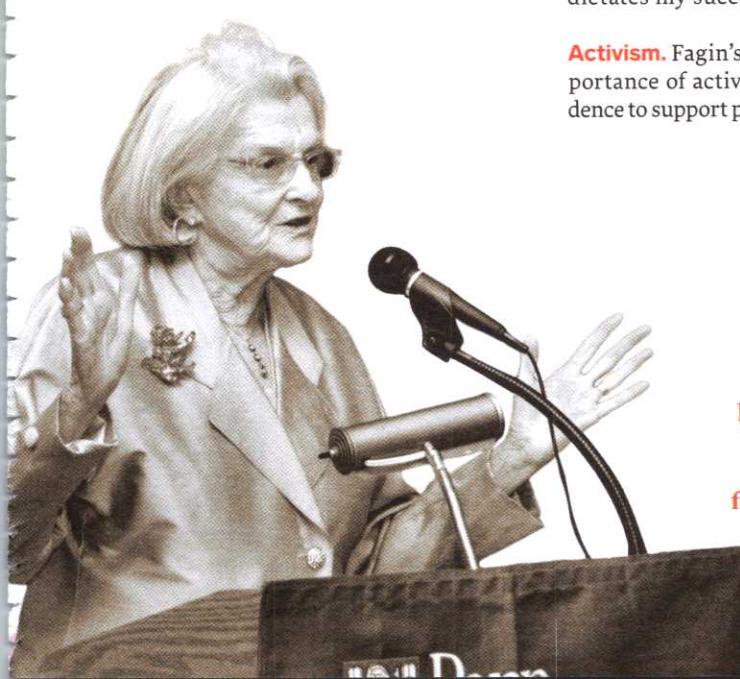
The report also offered suggestions for improved nursing organization, governance, and education.

Fagin's advocacy persisted well into her 90s. In the COVID-19 and post-COVID era, she continued via editorials to advocate for improvements in health care, weighing in on such topics as nursing education and public health financing. Her life and career hold lessons for us all, especially about how fortunate we are to be part of nursing.

"Whatever I have achieved, the awards I have gotten, the personal rewards I have felt, would not have come my way were I not a nurse," Fagin wrote in *Essays on Nursing Leadership*. "I feel I have given a lot to the profession, but I am not even near to repaying what it has given me. I shall always be grateful for the stroke of fortune that brought me to choose this wonderful field."

As Fagin's colleague, Neville Strumpf, professor emerita at Penn Nursing, noted at Fagin's Celebration of Life service on January 21, "No one needed to say her last name—she was Claire—accomplished, stylish, heroic, generous, hilarious, honest, fearless, larger-than-life, and forever proud to be a Real Nurse."

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