

A treasured elder...

Virginia Elizabeth Courtney Riley

Veteran nurse sees caregiving from the other side



Virginia Riley pauses and thinks carefully when asked about memorable moments in her life. It turns out there are several she'll discuss with the Treasure Our Elders interviewer over the next hour, but Riley starts with a just-the-facts account of how she divorced her first husband of 16 years after he told her of an indiscretion. "I told him goodbye and not to let the door hit him in the a** on the way out." You can tell Riley's no-nonsense manner (she doesn't use asterisks when she speaks) is still strong after 84 years. Today, the former cupcake factory worker, cotton picker, department store worker, self-made hospital nurse, wife, mother and grandmother is still going strong and is a daily omnipresence at the homelike 120-bed Parthenon Healthcare of Crestview.

Early life

Riley was born Virginia Elizabeth Courtney on February 2, 1924 in Chicago, the last of three children. Her father was career military who took retirement after 35 years due to a chronic heart condition. He died suddenly when she was 15, forcing Riley and her mother to move into a one-bedroom apartment with a bathroom down the hall in order to save money. "We both had to get jobs — mother sat for children and I worked in the Hostess cupcake factory," Riley recalls, sighing. Her brothers were grown and gone by then, so it was just Riley and her widowed mother in that cramped room. The arrangement was extremely difficult for both, so much so that Riley says she even contemplated suicide. "I called my brother out of desperation and the next day we were on our way to Virginia."

Riley was three months shy of her high school graduation when she married a young sailor with whom she had fallen in love. After World War II he studied Optometry on the GI Bill, graduated and set up a practice in his native Leland, in northwest Mississippi. Riley went to work in a local department store wrapping Christmas presents and selling ladies lingerie and later earned her GED. By age 35, her marriage had ended, her ex-husband moved to a nearby town and she and her two boys wondered what would come next.



Top Nurse: Virginia Riley started as a nurse's aide and retired a full-fledged RN. "A good nurse needs good 'eyesight,' meaning she needs to be a good observer. A patient will always tell you what's wrong whether he says anything or not."

Love, nursing, loving nursing

Riley had worked up through the ranks at the department store, but it was happenstance that caused her to enter nursing.

"I was sitting up with a girlfriend's mother while she was in the W.S. Witte Memorial Hospital in Leland. By the next morning, I had changed the bed, bathed her, groomed her and fixed her hair," she laughs. "The hospital administrator saw her and offered me a nurses aide job on the spot." Ten years later, Riley was in the first 21-student LPN class at Morehead State University, and later, in Morehead's 15-month RN program. "I just wanted to see if I could do it, and I did." Riley worked in every one of the hospital's departments ("I did everything from delivering babies to changing the oxygen tanks in the basement") over her long career there.

Love was just as serendipitous. "A girlfriend and I were in a club when a man came up and asked me to dance," Riley laughs, telegraphing what happened next by wrinkling up her nose. "But he had just come from the steel mill where he worked and he smelled bad. I told him so and pushed him away." Riley's still laughing: "He fell backward into an open barrel of ice next

to the bar!" But Dean Riley was the steel mill's Supervisor and not so easily dissuaded. Through mutual friends he obtained her phone number and asked her out. They dated for two years, married and remained a couple for almost 30 years until his death three years ago. Their last two years as man and wife were spent together in a private room at Parthenon Health Care of Crestview where Virginia — now a patient herself — helped the nursing staff care for husband Dean.

Seeing it all

Riley's own heart condition steadily worsened, so now this career nurse is on the receiving end of professional caregiving. "They do a wonderful job, I love them all," Riley says in praise of the Parthenon nursing and CNA staff. "Some people think a nursing home is a terrible place, but it isn't. People look out for you here, it's safe, clean and the food is good. I love it."

FHCA honors Virginia Elizabeth Courtney Riley and treasures her many contributions to our state and nation.

AHCA looking at ICP claims

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history, neither of which was true. Lost in the rigamarole with the "list of 4,000" was the CMS intent to focus the QIO activity into two areas that are goals within the "Advancing Excellence in America's Nursing Homes" campaign and that have historically shown improvement with QIO involvement. As they say, no good deed goes unpunished.

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