Dr. Elisabeth C. Adams – An Extraordinary Legacy

Growing up in Guilford during the forties, fifties and sixties was like having a checkerberry ice cream soda at Mr. Douden’s Drug Store on a hot summer day: cold, sweet and special. We kids had our problems. We suffered our growth pangs. We stumbled through adolescence and then one day, each in our own time and way, had to step up to the line and face adulthood. Some very special people blessed us in our time and place. They were ordinary people whose love and caring for us made them extraordinary people.

One of those extraordinary people we were fortunate to share with older folks was Dr. Elisabeth C. Adams because she cared for everyone. She never seemed to sleep. She never seemed to be on vacation. She was everywhere and everything to everyone who needed help, and she never let us down.

Dr. Adams served Guilford for many years in several official capacities, such as Health Director, Police Surgeon and Medical Examiner. She was the most petite person in town, but the only thing people looked up to more often was the clock on the First Church steeple.

As kids we would watch in awe as Dr. Adams would stand eyeball to belt buckle with a 250 pound, 6’ 3” volunteer fireman, flames and sparks crackling around them, as she reprimanded him for not following proper safety procedures - and he would listen!

We would stop in the middle of third down and two on the Green, look at each other and snicker, as her Volkswagen Bug beat the ambulance to an accident on Route One. Everyone in town knew that the car with no driver - she could barely see over the steering wheel - was Dr. Adams, and everyone made way.
Every building contractor in town knew that he had to wait for Dr. Adams’ approval before he covered the new septic tank, or he’d have to dig it back up, and it had better be the correct distance from the well, too!

Two or three times a week, Dr. Adams would come into my parents’ grocery store, usually in the evening when it wasn’t busy. She would say, “Seven bags tonight!” My mom would line up seven large grocery bags on the counter. Into each would go a couple of bananas and a bunch of grapes, which Dr. Adams always insisted had to be washed and dried carefully. My father would cut a pound of sliced meat and a pound of cheese for each bag while I picked out seven loaves of bread. Next, Dr. Adams would quickly cruise the aisles and select coffee for five and tea for two, peanut butter and some jelly and crackers. She would sometimes choose sugar, always milk, and a pound of number nine spaghetti for each bag. Then we would all load the bags into the back seat of her “Bug” and away she’d go in a swirl of dust, Guilford’s first, one-person “Welfare Department,” to deliver her bundles of nourishment along with her medical care. My dad never had to send Dr. Adams a bill. She would always give him more than enough money and would continuously maintain a credit in her account. She never, in twenty years, asked for a tally.

One day, in the fall of 1952, I was sitting with a family friend, Miss Marie Griswold, who lived in the Octagon House on Fair Street with her ninety-three-year-old mother. Marie was staring out the window, deep in thought. Her mother, small, frail, and very ill, was lying on the couch, her breathing raspy and harsh. I wanted to be with Marie, but I didn’t know what to say, so we sat in silence while I pretended to read my social studies homework.

At about five o’clock Dr. Adams arrived. She came right in without knocking, black bag in hand. She touched Marie gently on the shoulder and went immediately to work examining Marie’s mother. The sound of breathing that came from the couch had become very raspy, its labor more intensified. Dr. Adams finished her examination and motioned for me to go out to the hall with her. She closed the door carefully and placed both hands on my shoulders. Then she looked me straight in the eyes and asked in a quiet but firm voice, “Young man, have you ever been present when someone has died?”

My eyes wide, I could only sputter, “No!”

“Well,” she said, “I don’t think you should experience that just yet. You collect your books and run along back to the market. I’ll stay with Marie, and, please, don’t you say anything to anyone just yet.” I, of course, did as I was told.

Dr. Adams came by the market, just before we closed, at about seven forty-five, to tell my parents that Marie’s mother had just passed away. On the way out to her car, she whispered to me, “It was very good of you to visit with Marie today. It meant a great deal to her that you were there.” Riding my bike home in the dark, I cried all the way, but I still felt so grown up.

In the summer of 1956, Guilford didn’t have anything like 911. Therefore, when I cut my wrist with a wood saw just after midnight, my mother quickly called GL 3-2717, and Dr. Adams answered immediately. “You get him right up here and come straight in. The door’s unlocked.”

Dr. Adams cleaned the wound and placed on the table some thread and a little curved blade that looked like a fishhook without the barb. As she prepared her materials, she spoke in clipped, short statements. “Okay, this is going to hurt a little bit. But I know you’ll be brave and not fuss. If you cooperate, it will only take a minute or two.” She was right. It hurt. My white knuckles and I didn’t flinch or make a sound, and it only took her a few quick motions. I still have the scar and the knowledge that fatigue causes risk and sometimes loss.
On an afternoon in 1964, with a high fever and an achy feeling, I dragged myself into Dr. Adams’ office. She diagnosed strep, told me what to do, and called for my prescription. A month went by. I was well again but had never received a bill. I went to Dr. Adams’ office one day and asked the nurse if I could please pay my bill. She asked me to have a seat. A few minutes later, Dr. Adams scurried out of one room on her way to another, and, in a quiet voice, stated, “Listen, young man. You’re just home from the service, a veteran, and now you’re back in college. You can pay me later in life, but right now you’ve got work to do, and I have patients waiting, so you run along home and give your little boy Chris a hug from me.”

She did that for so many people we wondered how she ever made enough money to pay her own bills. We pondered a lot about this extraordinary little lady, who never wanted any recognition. We couldn’t even have a birthday party for her because no one knew the date of her birth or how old she was.

In the late sixties, when the “North Junior High School” was being built, I presented to the Board of Education the idea that we should name both junior high schools after worthy citizens. The Board appointed a committee to research the possibilities and make its recommendations. Mrs. Marjorie Guiles, Joel Helander and I met to begin our work. Mrs. Guiles asked if we had any preferences. Since I suggested Abraham Baldwin for the “North School,” Mrs. Guiles suggested someone more contemporary for the “South School.” Joel Helander immediately suggested Dr. Adams. Everyone’s face lit up; no explanation was necessary. It was unanimous. The meeting was adjourned after thirteen and a half minutes.

Dr. Adams loved her school. She treasured her family of students, Duncan Craig and all the staff. She truly enjoyed their successes and was always available to help in her own unique way.

On November 1, 1990, after having lived in Guilford for forty years, and recently retired, Dr. Adams wrote in a note: “Not until I retired did I realize that I was married to medicine. Now I feel like I’ve had a fortieth wedding anniversary! Furthermore, you are claimed as cousins, the more treasured when children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews are lacking for me.”

On July 13, 1994, Dr. Adams called her school and asked the secretary, Mrs. Larson, if she had mailed her the list of students who had made the honor roll for the last marking period. Mrs. Larson assured her that the list had been mailed, and Dr. Adams was pleased, because she was eager to write her personal note to each of those hard working students, as had been her custom for almost twenty-five years.

Those students will not receive her notes now, but they should always remember that they were in her thoughts on the last day of her life - just another “ordinary” day in the life of Dr. Elisabeth C. Adams, an extraordinary legacy for all of us.

By: Carl A. Balestracci Jr., a lifelong Guilford resident and long-time local educator. He is the former principal of the Dr. Elisabeth C. Adams Middle School.