

Thoughts and Words to Honor the Memory  
of

***Mary Caroline Becker Long, MD***

The Forest at Duke

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May I start with a confession? I asked to be allowed to share these thoughts, to say these words. When sorrow and stress happen, friends, neighbors, or colleagues always say, “What can I do to help? Call me if I can do anything.” The bereaved family rarely follows up with a call to seek help. After that first big offer, people rarely ever call the bereaved to run errands or to do things that need to be done. When a mutual friend phoned to tell me of Caroline’s passing, I knew immediately that I wanted to “help” by telling of the life and times of the Caroline I knew. I volunteered. I did the calling, and Caroline’s son Croft accepted my “help”, and here we are.

Many of you already know that Caroline Becker Long had a long and illustrious career as physician, epidemiologist, and environmentalist. You may know that she went to medical school when not many girls went to medical school. She didn't go to Podunk U. to medical school. She went to Johns Hopkins. In London, she set up labs for Sir Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of penicillin. She also set up labs in Central America. You may not know that she worked at both Duke and Carolina.

I want to talk with you about some other things that you probably don't know about Caroline. Caroline always had a project going – from helping 5<sup>th</sup> graders save a creek behind their school – to saving the Eno River. One of her short-term projects came to fruition one summer when she was in charge of arrangements for the 1985 Society for Epidemiologic Research annual meeting to be held on the UNC campus. Memorial Hall, a stodgy, beloved old turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup> Century building was the only mid-campus venue large enough to hold the full conference assembly. The June heat would be

staggering. Caroline arranged for Memorial Hall to be air conditioned for the duration of the week-long conference.

I was fortunate enough to be one of Caroline's main projects for a time. I would still be in graduate school had it not been for Caroline Becker Long. She was my teacher and mentor; she became a dear, dear friend.

Let me speak about Caroline as teacher. She was on the faculty of the epidemiology department in the University of North Carolina School of Public Health. The department had moved away from the epidemiologies of infectious diseases – epidemiology's historic emphasis – to studies of chronic disease epidemiology with emphases on conditions such as cancer, heart disease, and stroke, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century big killers. Science had conquered many of the major infectious traditional wondrous and killers – smallpox, typhoid, diphtheria, polio, measles, leprosy – and the march was on to conquer TB and influenza – sort of. Caroline taught the only basic course on infectious disease in the department. I took the course and loved it. Because the department had moved away from

infectious disease, Caroline's forte, an area in which she was internationally recognized, she felt isolated. Further, she was moved out of Rosenau Hall, the main Public Health building, and given an office in a grubby little house on Pittsboro Street on land now occupied by the School's beautiful new wing, a building that I actually find dark and dreary.

But as Caroline said years later, the abandonment of "germ" epidemiology lasted only until the HIV epidemic struck, and then public health institutions across the country scrambled like with a house afire to return to infectious disease roots.

Caroline taught the course in ways not found in textbooks. If information can't be reduced to a 2 X 2 table, epidemiologists think it doesn't exist. What do polio, leprosy, syphilis, tuberculosis, measles, and influenza have in common? How are they different? Each class member took a disease and addressed the principles set up by Caroline. I remember that a physician from South Carolina who had served in the Navy in Hawaii, took leprosy as his study disease. I took

German measles (rubella) as my study disease. What *principles* do we need to know about all of them? Each of them? What is the organism? Mode of transmission?

What are the *principles* of herd immunity?

What are the *principles* of why it's more difficult to develop vaccines for some diseases than for others?

What are the *principles* of long range, unforeseen consequences of some infectious diseases? Today we would launch into a convoluted discussion of epigenetics and agents that activate genes if we talked about a long-range effect such as schizophrenia following influenza epidemics. This *principle* of long range unanticipated consequences of rubella became the *principle* upon which my dissertation was based.

Let me speak about Caroline's role as a mentor.

Dr. Barbara Hulka, who is here today, was my advisor. She was moving on to bigger things than my dissertation. She was directing major research projects, preparing to become department chair and finding other similar big world pursuits,

so she asked Caroline to take over my case. Barbara Hulka and I worked well together, and we had tried for two years for me to get access to a dataset I needed from another university department. We got the run around rather than the dataset. Caroline got the dataset within two weeks. I think she called in some favors from the Memorial Hall air conditioning days. She directed me to come to her office every Friday afternoon at 2:00. She announced, “You are drowning in your data. Let’s make a flow chart and get this organized.” I had a working dissertation draft in six weeks.

Finally, I will speak about Caroline as a friend. She met my parents. She came to our 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary party. Over the years, I have met all Caroline’s relatives seated here on the front row today – her sister and brother-in-law Elizabeth and Tom Bracket. Her niece, Dianne Becker, and I would be BFFs if we lived near each other. I’ve known Caroline’s son Croft since he was perhaps fourteen when Caroline was serving both as Croft’s pit crew for his motocross racing adventures, and my pit

crew for the dissertation. Croft's Christine and I have known and liked each other since their beginnings.

My husband and I were with Caroline at lunch the day she had the stroke that sealed her decision to sell the beautiful house on Timberly Drive and move to The Forest at Duke. The day of the move, I helped Croft and Christine transport items to the Thrift Shop.

And in her Forest years, Caroline always had a project or two going on. She helped The Forest at Duke set up a system of Friends Among Residents so that residents' health and welfare news could be shared with others without violating HIPPA privacy guidelines.

Early in her days at The Forest, Caroline figured out that FAD resident Dr. James Calvin, had been chairman of the psychology department at the University of Kentucky at the time my husband John Lynn Lubker was a doctoral student there. Caroline invited John and me for dinner with

Dr. Calvin. He and Lynn had a lovely evening of “Remember When.” Another small project completed.

Every year Caroline’s Christmas card was a six-page family creation worthy of publication. Several years John and I were pictured in the Christmas message along with the Beckers and Brackets.

Caroline telephoned one day. “Go with me to Washington, DC,” she said. “Actually, we are going to Chantilly, Virginia, to the opening and dedication of the National Air and Space Museum.” So two days later an airport attendant and I zipped Caroline through the RDU airport in a wheelchair, and Caroline and I flew to our nation’s capital. Why were we going on to the Air and Space Museum? We were going because Caroline was invited by the Smithsonian Institution as an honored guest. From that day forward, plaques dedicated to the Becker family have been on permanent display at the museum honoring the Beckers as flight pioneers from the 1930s, when they flew small planes from a tiny airstrip created from a field at Rolling Shoals Farm, Caroline’s girlhood home in



Missouri. How were we going to get to Virginia from DC? We were going to take a \$95.00 taxi ride. That's \$95.00 one way.

At the museum registration desk, we were greeted with official papers and beautiful pendant medals. In the throng, I introduced myself and Caroline to Astronaut-Senator John Glenn and Mrs. Annie Glenn who had had a severe life-long stuttering problem. I had helped develop the speech pathology program that gave her normal speech fluency in her middle years. Caroline was pleased as I was about the out-of-the-blue contact.

Senator Glenn shook our hands; Annie Glenn kissed me on the cheek. She whispered, "You changed my life." Caroline beamed. Vice-president Dick Cheney was there and William Rehnquist, Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court and John Travolta who owns his own personal 747. From pictures in the program I recognized Lawrence Small, executive director of the Smithsonian Institution, the museum's parent organization and a primary sponsor of this event. I wheeled Caroline right up to Mr. Small, and in my shy, withdrawn way introduced us both.

Ever the politician, Mr. Small, recognized Caroline's name immediately. He engaged her in conversation about their recent phone chat concerning the Becker plaques. Caroline and I stayed in a beautiful motel and flew home the next day. We had a wonderful time.

On to her next project.

Caroline wrote a book, *Church Bells of Antigua and Surrounding Villages*. She delved into boxes of pictures and data collected during her years in Guatemala when, with a special introductory letter to priests from the Guatemalan Tourist Bureau in hand she climbed into church belfries to take photos and inscription rubbings of antique bells that she had heard chiming from her home. Her niece Dianne's photographs of bells and church facades enhance the books pages. The book was published in 1999. Caroline asked me to help with site locations on maps and to write the introduction. I did both with joy and appreciation. Copies are in the Forest at Duke library and the Library of Congress.

I will tell you one final thing. My father was something of an authority on superstitions and folk beliefs. For years he wrote a newspaper column, *Science vs. Superstition*. Every culture he knew about had a belief similar to the idea that bad things happen in “threes.” This year, 2014, has been my bad year of threes. On February 4, my mother’s last brother died. I was complimented to present his eulogy. On February 18, I had a light stroke. On February 25, the ceiling fell in our downstairs bathroom. As the year has moved forward, I have come to believe that the ceiling collapse was just one of those things – something paid for by insurance and fixable by a good plumber – not part of the “bad three” series. The third bad event was really that I have lost Caroline. That can’t be fixed. Thank you for letting me share these thoughts and words. Today would have been Caroline’s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. I’m glad I volunteered to help. I’m glad Croft accepted my offer of “help.”

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