Margaret Burns, M.D., 1912-2011
by Harold G. Koenig

The field of psychiatry suffered a great loss when Dr. Margaret Burns died a few weeks ago, one day short of her 99th birthday. She was indeed an extraordinary person (profiled in the Duke Magazine in May-June 2003 (see website http://dukemagazine.duke.edu/dukemag/issues/050603/depmini-burns.html). In 1937 Margaret was the first woman who had also been a Duke undergraduate to receive an MD degree at Duke University. In the early 1950s she became a psychiatrist, doing a residency at Wake Forest University’s medical school. She practiced psychiatry in Asheville for many years, first at Highland Hospital (psychiatric facility owned and operated by Duke) for approximately 10 years and then in private practice full-time for nearly 30 years and part-time until after the age of 90. In fact, Margaret was still advising another psychotherapist about that practitioner’s patients just a few weeks prior to the 6-week illness that eventually took her life.

According to Gwen Ashburn at University of North Carolina at Asheville, who interviewed Margaret for a book she was writing on Asheville’s prominent women, “Burns was a pioneer who treated black patients during segregation and often went into jails to see mentally ill people.” During her interview for the Duke Magazine article, Margaret -- the ever-humble one -- dismissed the idea that she had had an extraordinary career or had blazed trails for succeeding generations of female physicians.

Despite her accomplishments and unswerving dedication to her patients, Margaret did not have an easy life. In her interview for the Duke Magazine article, she described herself as "’socially backward’ and clumsy as a child” and later as “scared of every patient that came in there. I felt I was going to make a mistake in treating someone." Particularly influential in her life, however, was her contraction of tuberculosis after graduating from medical school and beginning work in a hospital in Delaware. Treatment involved three stages of chest surgery to shorten ribs and thereby reduce the size of the thoracic cavity. Despite this massive procedure (which few survived for long in those days), she lived another 70 years and was lucid and competent until the last day of her life.

No doubt, these experiences help to explain why Margaret was a very spiritual person, who integrated religion and spirituality into therapy with patients. Although she attended Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, she was not conventionally religious. Throughout her life, she listened to God’s leading as she cared for patients. This gave her an immense sensitivity in assessing people and their problems, and in devising wise and effective solutions. There are many, many people alive today because of her influence, people who otherwise might not still be living given their severe psychiatric illnesses. Margaret Burns leaves a great legacy that only the people she saved understand the true magnitude of.

This article was written based the Duke Magazine article above and a conversation with her friend, John Devine.

For a more in-depth article about Margaret Burns’ life by Carolyn Jackson, a free-lance writer from New York who came to Asheville years ago to interview Margaret for a book she was writing, see website: http://www.obit-mag.com/articles/look-and-listen-dr-margaret-burns.