

Relying on herself, Looking Out for the children



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN KEARNS

Dr. Sarah Morrow

When Sarah Morrow (then Sarah Taylor) was five years old, she went with her physician father to see a premature baby he had delivered. When the mother came out holding the tiny infant in one hand, the little girl thought, “That’s what I want to do, take care of babies.”

She fulfilled that intention many times over, as a pediatrician, as a mother who raised six children by herself, and especially as a pioneering public health leader. At the Guilford County Department of Public Health from

1960 through 1976, and then as secretary of North Carolina’s Department of Human Resources until 1984, Sarah Morrow made reducing the child mortality rate one of her top priorities.

“She had one of the first, if not the first, very large scale programs for dealing with children who did not have adequate access to care,” says Dr. Ron Levine, who was with the state health department when Morrow established the Child and Youth Program in Guilford County. “It was the early days of Medicaid, and the financing was available but the services were not there. She took the rather bold step of saying, ‘We’re a provider. While our focus is on good health and the prevention of disease, it’s appropriate when all else fails to become intimately involved with services.’ She got a huge grant from the federal government to provide everything that a child on the private side could expect from their pediatrician—immunizations, preschool screening, the whole spectrum of care.”

Because of this and other innovations, the Guilford County health department under Morrow’s direction was regarded as one of the best in the nation. Still, she was surprised when then-Governor James B. Hunt Jr., asked her to join his cabinet as secretary of what is now the Department of Health and Human Services. In fact, at first she said no. She’d have to take a salary cut, and she still had one son living at home in Greensboro. Hunt asked again, and she declined again. Then he asked a third time.

This time Morrow accepted, and became the first woman to lead the department, just as she’d been Guilford County’s first woman health director. She took the challenge in stride, having long depended on herself both personally and professionally. She had become a doctor at the ripe old age of 23, her



training hastened along because there was a war on. She earned her Bachelor of Science in medicine at UNC in 1942 and graduated from the University of Maryland's medical school two years later.

"The schooling and conditioning that makes a good doctor gives a sense of independence and security and confidence in oneself," she says. She would need that confidence in the personal challenges ahead.

She married a medical school classmate and

"When you have six children, all with different personalities, you learn to compromise and negotiate," she says. "I think that is one of the essentials in leadership. When you deal with people who have different ideas than you do, it's so important to be able to see their side and be able to compromise and negotiate."

By the time she joined Hunt's cabinet, that ability was second nature. "It was always a challenge to determine where (resources were) most badly needed," she says. "I had to

during Morrow's years as secretary, and decades later there is abundant evidence of her personal and professional impact on public health in the state. Morrow retired in 2005 at the age of 84 after twenty years as medical director for Electronic Data Systems. She remains an active volunteer for North Carolina Citizens for Public Health, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting citizen involvement in public health issues. Several of her children went on to their own careers in public health. Son John earned a master's in nutrition from Carolina's School of Public Health in 1983 and is now director of the Pitt County (N.C.) Health Department. Daughter Lynne Perrin recently retired from the Division of Medical Assistance in the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services and now consults with a hospital in Charlotte, N.C. Another son, Paul, works in the administrative side of public health as a budget officer with the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services. And one of Morrow's thirteen grandchildren, Sarah Lacy Dean, 21, now lives with "Granny Doc" while she pursues a pre-med curriculum at Carolina. ■

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eventually moved with him to South Carolina. When he was called back to the Navy during the Korean War, she took a job leading the Chester, S.C., health department. She had four children by then and was expecting another.

"While he was gone, I ran the health department, built a house and had a baby," she says. When her husband came back, they had another child. By then it became clear he had mental health problems so severe that she would have to be the sole breadwinner. In 1959, she came to Chapel Hill to complete a master's degree at the UNC School of Public Health and refresh her pediatric skills.

Her husband by then required residential psychiatric care. With the help of the family's longtime housekeeper, Morrow raised her children while taking increasing responsibility as a public health leader. She used some of the same skills in both roles.

work that out with our General Assembly. The representatives were looking out for the needs of their own counties, and you had to balance that against the needs of the whole state."

Access to health care for North Carolina's infants and children improved dramatically

Dr. Sarah Morrow served as secretary of what is now North Carolina's Department of Health and Human Services from 1976 through 1984. She was the first woman to lead the department. Morrow (right) points to a photo of her 1942 University of Maryland medical school class. She earned a master's of public health from Carolina's School of Public Health in 1959.



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