

From Paris, Afghanistan and Zimbabwe with Love

BY JASON BARONE (GRS'08)



AN INTERNATIONAL CAREER INSPIRES ALUMNA MARIE GRUBISHA WILKIE TO SUPPORT NURSING WORLDWIDE

War and espionage may sound more like the setting of a summer blockbuster, but both were the real-life backdrop for Marie Grubisha Wilkie's (NUR '54) nursing career in international health.

Her adventures began innocently enough in 1958, when Wilkie joined two Frances Payne Bolton School of Nursing classmates for a summer in Europe. Her vacation led to a yearlong nursing position at the American Hospital in Paris, assignments in Switzerland and Belgium, and with the World Health Organization in Asia and Africa.

Wilkie was also sent to Afghanistan, where she helped establish one of the country's first nursing programs for girls. In the field, she encountered—and fought against—a number of detrimental, but traditional health care practices. For instance, she learned that a traditional form of swaddling that used a binding cord caused pneumonia, which contributed to the country's 75-percent newborn mortality rate.

"When one infant died in a rural clinic's waiting room, an Afghani doctor became so angry that he broke the cord and told the other mothers to throw theirs away if they wanted their babies to live," she says. "Within minutes, the clinic was surrounded by about 15 armed tribesmen demanding to kill him for his interference. We helped him escape through a back door," Wilkie recalls.

While in Afghanistan, Wilkie also met her future husband William, a Scotsman who was a British intelligence agent.

"Although we could never admit it at the time, he was actually an agent for London's MI6—a real-life James Bond!" she says.

The couple settled in Rhodesia—now the Republic of Zimbabwe—for 11 years amid an ongoing brutal guerilla war. Despite this tense backdrop, she witnessed women beginning to question centuries of restrictive traditions, such as paying witch doctors for expensive amulets that supposedly protected their infants by warding off evil spirits.


She remembers a woman who stood up at her clinic and asked other mothers how much they had paid to protect their babies. "She said 'If we all agree not to buy these amulets we can't afford, our babies would all be equal, so we shouldn't need them.' And that one woman changed that practice in just a matter of minutes."

The couple fled Rhodesia's turmoil for the United States in 1980. Settled in Pittsburgh, Wilkie, now a widow, remains an active force for nursing education, having trained more than 250 operating room nurses in liaison with a local community college.

She also continues her involvement in world health issues by providing both moral and financial support to many of the nursing school's international students. Through her annual fund gifts and an annuity trust, she helps students who set up or improve nursing programs in their home countries. Her gifts have enabled nursing education to continue and flourish on a global scale.

"I've seen the tremendous difference that health education can make around the world," she says. "An FPB education raises the status of women and improves world health conditions, and I'm proud to contribute to that legacy."

And, judging by Wilkie's career, an FPB education can put a little adventure in your life, too. +



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