

Quiet Pioneer

Beyond the lab and classroom, Elizabeth Crosby's life was rich with family

BY WHITLEY HILL

PART II OF II

ALL THESE YEARS LATER, there are several versions of how, in her early 50s, Elizabeth Crosby, Ph.D., world-renowned neuroanatomist, unmarried and having little experience with children, became the mother of Kathleen Rosena Robb, a vivacious Scottish 14-year-old with red curls. One account is that the girl's father, an impoverished gardener in Aberdeen where Crosby was spending a year teaching, begged Crosby to take

Scotland to live in Ann Arbor with Crosby. They settled into a simple apartment on Elizabeth Street.

Crosby was, by now, a full professor in the Medical School — the first woman to achieve that rank. Her academic brilliance and dedication to her work were beyond dispute, but it was her deferent, non-threatening personality that made it possible for the powerful men she worked with to accept and even champion this “little lady” (as some called her) in their midst.

with her parents now gone, Crosby forged relationships that sustained her. Her first major companion seems to have been Dorothea Paquette. Born just eight days apart, Crosby and Paquette grew up together in Petersburg, Michigan. Even as she worked at the U-M, Crosby bought a brick, Tudor-style home in her hometown, with the intention of eventually retiring there with Paquette, a local schoolteacher. When Paquette was killed in a car accident in Petersburg in June of 1936 — just weeks after

ON THE LAST DAY OF EACH NEUROANATOMY COURSE, STUDENTS SPRANG TO THEIR FEET, APPLAUDING, AND PRESENTED CROSBY WITH A BOUQUET OF ROSES, HER FAVORITE FLOWER.

his youngest daughter far from the dangers of World War II. Another is that Crosby became friends with the Robb family and connected deeply with the child. Still another is that Kathleen climbed a tree in her backyard, which adjoined Crosby's, and fell over the old stone wall and into Crosby's heart and life.

All may be true or partly true, but in any event, in 1940, Kathleen left

Behind the façade of a tiny, studious, middle-aged spinster, however, was a huge heart filled with love and compassion, and a desire to fill her life with meaning and experiences beyond the laboratory. Adopting Kathleen — and taking on the care and education of a young Detroit girl, Suzanne McCotter, a few years later — was an expression of that.

With no brothers and sisters, and

Crosby was named professor in the Medical School — her obituary listed Crosby as a survivor.

Crosby shared the later years of her life with Tryphena Humphrey (M.D. 1931, Ph.D. 1936), whom she called “Trap.” Originally a protégé of Crosby, who oversaw her dissertation, Humphrey went on to a 28-year collaboration with Davenport Hooker, M.D., at the University of Pittsburgh,

studying physiological neuroembryology. Humphrey and Crosby shared a home on and off, traveled together frequently and co-authored papers. In 1958, Humphrey wrote to a friend, “The Crosby-Humphrey family has a new car, the cheapest 1958 Chevrolet on the market.”

The sheer volume of Crosby’s published work, and the awards, accolades and lectures, attest to an almost impossibly productive career. And she was an extraordinary teacher of neuroanatomy. On the last day of each course, students sprang to their feet, applauding, and presented her with a bouquet of roses, her favorite flower. In 1957, the Galens Medical Society established the Elizabeth C. Crosby Award for outstanding teaching in the basic sciences.

Crosby’s retirement in 1958 did not slow her pace; in fact, it marked the beginning of a second career in which she applied her encyclopedic knowledge of the nervous system to neurosurgery. She worked alongside Edgar Kahn (M.D. 1924, Residency 1926) and Richard C. Schneider, M.D. (Residency 1948), and others in the Department of Neurosurgery, often accompanying them into the operating room to consult on difficult cases.

In 1963, at the age of 75, Crosby joined the faculty of the University of Alabama, in Birmingham, where Humphrey was teaching. They bought a house together. And for the next 18 years, Crosby commuted, by plane, back to Ann Arbor for two weeks at a time, staying in a room at the Michigan League, continuing her work. She suffered from osteoporosis



and often used crutches — and was known to wave one, in good humor, at anyone who tried to assist her.

Throughout this time, Crosby maintained close ties with Kathleen, now married with five children of her own, and with Suzanne McCotter.

Kelly Palmer, one of Kathleen’s children, is a retired paramedic who lives in Ann Arbor and remembers his “Auntie” — as he and his siblings called her — with great fondness. “Without question, she got great satisfaction from sitting at the house with all of us, her family,” he says. “She took us to the League to eat at the restaurant there. She’d taught so many students. They’d come up to us and ask her, ‘Do you remember me?’ and she never failed to tell them she did.”

Tryphena Humphrey died in 1971. In 1980, Crosby traveled to Washington, D.C., to receive the National Medal of Science from President Jimmy Carter; she made the President hold her crutches as a photographer snapped pictures.



TOP: The beloved instructor
ABOVE: Humphrey and Crosby in the 1960s

Crosby returned to Michigan in 1981 and eventually moved into Kathleen’s home in Dexter. Her son-in-law drove her to the lab every day. On July 28, 1983, at the age of 94, Crosby died at home with Kathleen at her side. On her chest was a paper she’d been working on; in her hand was a pen. [M]

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