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Brinson, Gretchen: A Born Nurse [1]

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Gretchen Brinson: A Born Nurse

by David Cecelski. "Listening to History [2]," *News & Observer*. Published 6/14/1998. Copyrighted.
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I visited with Gretchen Brinson at her home in the Promised Land neighborhood of Morehead City. In the opening months of American involvement in World War II, German submarines [3] sank more than 140 merchant vessels off the North Carolina coast. While a press blackout kept people inland from knowing how close the war had come to our shores, wounded sailors overwhelmed her local hospital. Recognizing the severe shortage of nurses, Brinson enrolled in a Red Cross crash course in nursing in 1942. She remained a nurse for 30 years, until she retired from Carteret General Hospital at 72. "I was born to nurse, " she told me. Now, at 82, she is still a hospice volunteer and nursing home visitor.

Brinson was rather wistful about the changes that have occurred in Morehead since World War II. When she was young, Morehead was "a neighborhood-oriented, family town." She could walk to her church, her job, her bank, her grocery store. "There was a security," she told me. "You had a rapport of some sort with everybody. When you started in the first grade, you knew who your teacher was going to be: your first grade teacher, your second grade teacher. You knew their families, and you knew you had to be good in school because your teacher knew your mother. That way of life has passed. It's a whole other world. Everybody moves."

Brinson's life as a caregiver began when her sister Daphne was born. She was 8 years old.

In Gretchen Brinson's words:

> My mother was never well after Daphne was born. At that time, an 8-year-old child did not know much. I did not know I was going to have a little sister that Sunday morning, and when I came downstairs I had a little sister. As I said, my mothe
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> Nowadays, I don't know if a girl my age could have coped with what I coped with. I went from day to day. My grandmother was a great deal of help. My daddy had to work away for long times, so my grandmother and I took roomers.
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> I married Bull Brinson in 1937. While my daughter was still an infant, I started working at the hospital. Very shortly, we began hearing depth charges and if they had a strike we could see the fires, the ships burning. The debris washed up on t
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> We only had one surgeon, Dr. Ben Royal. He was the only surgeon in the county. He set all the bones. He did all the initial burn treatment. He did all the debridement. Debridement is cutting away burned flesh, burned flesh, burned skin. He e
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> So many of those young men were foreigners and did not speak English. One young man, Tony, was about the most seriously wounded that I can recall. Tony was in one of the ships that was torpedoed. That was a bad one: It did not compl
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> Usually, Dr. Royal and the local doctors would patch them up as best they could and send them on to Norfolk, to a naval hospital. As soon as they were able to travel, they were sent out from here. Tony had no people. The fact that he had la
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> Many of the young men who came here, son, did not live. When the 3 o'clock train left town, the baggage car doors were most always open, and you could see several coffins in their wooden boxes, being shipped to other places. There was
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> It is almost impossible - I don't even want - to remember some of them. You have to learn to disassociate yourself at times, to work automatically, to get the job done. Then, of course, when you come home a lot of times, you just fell apart, wh
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> I don't remember, son, that I was ever apprehensive about how close the war came to us. I am not easily frightened. I accept things as they come. I teach Sunday school and have studied in depth questions and answers of why we are born a

Additional Resources:

Audio Recording [4]: Interview with Gretchen and A. L. "Bull" Brinson; part of the project Southern Communities at the Southern Oral History Program: Brinson, Gretchen and Brinson, A. L. June 30, 1995. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill. http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/sohp/id/15127 [4].

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