

Compton, Betty Baines ^[1]

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4 Nov 1940 -

In the 1960s, the crossroads community of Prospect Hill, North Carolina lost its only physician. Dr. Warren had spent decades treating hundreds of families in rural Caswell and Orange Counties. Citizens of the area organized themselves, raised money to create a clinic and advertised for another physician to come to their town. No one answered the call.

As luck would have it, health care leaders from the departments of nursing, medicine and public health at the nearby University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill were creating a new program to address the problem of physician shortages in rural North Carolina. In the fall of 1970, they began the third Family Nurse Practitioner program in the country. Seven nurses enrolled in this grand experiment to expand their skills to include diagnosing and treating common health problems in a community health setting. One of those settings would be the new Prospect Hill Community Health Center, the first community health center in North Carolina. Orange County public health nurse Betty Compton would be one of those pioneering nurses.

Born November 4, 1940, into a sharecropping family in rural Nash County, North Carolina, Compton would rise to become one of the first Family Nurse Practitioners in the country as well as a tenured professor at the UNC School of Medicine. Her remarkable professional story can be traced to the day she finished first in the school bus driving competition and used her winnings to pay her tuition at the Watts Hospital School of Nursing. Compton did so well in nursing school that she was invited to work at Watts Hospital after graduation and soon became the night nurse supervisor. Shortly after graduation, Compton married and moved to Cedar Grove, just a few miles from Prospect Hill in Orange County. After she married and started a family, she needed a job that would be compatible with being a wife and mother. She became a Public Health Nurse with the Orange County Health Department in nearby Hillsborough.

The trailblazers who were establishing the FNP program at UNC–Chapel Hill wanted to recruit students were. When the opportunity arose to become a Family Nurse Practitioner and help her extended family members and neighbors through the Prospect Hill Community Health Center, Compton jumped at the chance.

In the spring of 1971, after several months of classroom instruction followed by several more months of clinical practice with physicians, Compton and her peers earned their certificates as Family Nurse Practitioners (FNP). The North Carolina Health Bulletin, a publication of the NC Department of Health featured an article about the "New Breed of Nurse" in its September, 1971 issue including a picture of Compton on a home visit. She recalled the early years of her FNP practice:

"We filled a need in the 70s by placing... nurse practitioners where a physician would not go ... when there was a cry for physicians to go to rural areas ... I am not drowned or inundated all weekend although there was a time I thought I couldn't leave home, but I overcame that. If someone is dying in the community, I'll be called. I am just sort of the community caretaker."

Compton became a state and national advocate for the new role of Family Nurse Practitioner. Less than a year after she graduated from the program, Compton spoke on a panel at the October, 1971, North Carolina Nurse Association convention about the role of the FNP. In the Spring of 1972 she spoke to the NC Association of Student Nurses about the new role. In 1974 Compton appeared on a panel at the American Nurse Association Convention and was part of a panel discussion on the CBS radio program "The progress in American medicine". In addition to her presentations, Compton, and the other early FNPs and their physician colleagues published numerous articles about Family Nurse Practitioners and the effects of their practice on different populations. Compton was a co-author of articles in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, the *Southern Medical Journal*, *Pediatrics* and the *Western Journal of Nursing Research*. In 1984, the New York based Wonder Women Foundation recognized her as one of 17 outstanding American Women for her work in expanding rural health care. *Southern Living* magazine published an article about her in its May, 1984 issue.

During the 1970s Compton served as an adjunct Clinical Instructor for the UNC School of Nursing FNP program as well as an Assistant Professor in the UNC School of Medicine's Department of Social and Administrative Medicine. In 1981 she accepted a full time position in the UNC School of Medicine's Department of Pediatrics. In the early 1980s, Compton taught FNP skills to health care workers in both Turkey and Swaziland. Compton was honored by the UNC School of Nursing as its Alumnus of the Year in 1985. Although she worked in the School of Medicine, Compton stayed active in the North Carolina Nurse Association, serving on the "75th anniversary history committee" in 1976.

Today, the work and spirit of Compton and the other pioneer FNPs and their physician colleagues lives on. In 2011, a new Prospect Hill Clinic building and Dental Clinic opened serving hundreds of clients a day. The Prospect Hill Community Health Center is now part of the much larger Piedmont Health organization. Their mission statement reflects the ideals of its founders.

Compton is retired as an FNP and university professor, but remains very active in her community. Two of her biggest joys are playing and singing in a local "jam" session she started in 2000 called "Picking and Grinning". Every Thursday night at the Schley Grange Hall up to 200 people come to sing, play, dance and share fellowship. Once a month is "cake night". This may be because another of Compton's legendary joys and skills in cake baking. She was recently featured in the book *Cake Ladies: Celebrating a Southern Tradition*. In it, she sums up her philosophy of life by saying... who you are is about who you love, not about whether somebody loves you, and it's the ones who are a little bit harder to love that matter. What God's given us, we don't get to keep it. We've got to send it on. But if you give, it comes back to you in so many ways."

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