

DCNA Together – Making a Difference in DC

Special Edition, August 2017 - Evelyn Sommers



DCNA Leader, Evelyn Sommers Passes Away

On August 25, 2017, Ms. Evelyn Sommers, former Executive Director passed away after a short stay in hospice care. Ms. Sommers served as Executive Director from 1980 – 2002, making her the longest tenured Executive Director in DCNA history. She taught and mentored countless numbers of nurses. Under Ms. Sommers' leadership DCNA thrived as an organizing entity (increasing membership in the

union), a powerful force in legislative matters affecting health care and collective bargaining and as an educational resource.

Nurses represented by DCNA for collective bargaining during her tenure included those at DC General Hospital, the VA Medical Center, the DC Department of Health and Human Services, Howard University Hospital, the Washington Hospital Center, Capitol Hill Hospital, Children's National Medical Center, Greater Southeast Community Hospital and Columbia Hospital for Women.



During the 1980s and 1990s, DCNA supported legislative initiatives such as the Patient's Bill of Rights and the Family and Medical Leave Act and fostered passage in the District of a comprehensive and progressive Nurse Practice Act, one of the first in the country that ensured the right of nurses to practice to the full extent of their education and scope of their profession. Under her leadership, DCNA's PAC became a major political force. She analyzed nurse voters in each ward in the District of Columbia so that DCNA members could provide decisive votes in the election of many current legislative leaders, including Phil Mendelson, Vincent Gray, and Eleanor Holmes Norton. (Photo at left: DCNA strike at Howard University Hospital, 1999, with Mary Jones Bryant and Evelyn Sommers.)

After Ms. Sommers' retirement from DCNA, she and her husband John Sommers assisting in the opening of a school in Kenya which has graduated hundreds of students who have since attended college and/or became gainfully employed. The continued supporting the school for years. Evelyn also served as President of the Board of Directors of the DC chapter of the YWCA, which faced numerous financial issues. Along with then-Executive Director Tamara Smith, she and the volunteers and staff worked together to develop and implement an action plan that ensured considerable expansion of the YWCA, which currently remains a vital DC community resource.

On August 31st, family, friends and colleagues remembered Ms. Sommers in a memorial service at Glenview Mansion in Rockville, Maryland. **Donations (in lieu of flowers) can be made to the National Capital Area YWCA.** To see Ms. Sommers' obituary in the Washington Post, please follow this link:

<http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/washingtonpost/obituary.aspx?pid=186506956>



DCNA Nurse Leaders Reflect Upon Evelyn Sommer's Impact Upon their Lives

Sandra Falwell, At-Large member, DCNA Board of Directors, former President, DCNA. Through Evelyn's leadership and mentoring she helped me when I was elected President of DCNA. Under her tutelage, I learned how to be a nurse leader. She has left a legacy of nursing advocacy for so many nurses within DCNA. (Photo at right, page 1: Sandra Falwell, Evelyn Sommers and Valerie Tate.)

Valerie Tate, former staff nurse at Capitol Hill Hospital, E&GW Chair, Treasurer and President of DCNA. Ms. Tate also was employed by DCNA as an organizer and in communications. She showed me what it took to speak truth to power. She showed compassion for the oppressed and mistreated. She was gentle, generous and kind. She was passionate and patient; and sometimes angry and impatient... always for a good cause.

I remember being in awe of her strategic mind. She taught me how to set a goal, figure out how to reach it, and do the necessary work. She wasn't the be all and end all and she knew it. She knew how to find the best experts and how to get the best out of them. She encouraged me, and many, many others to try new roles and responsibilities. When I was afraid she didn't push. She would give me a little time and then come back and ask and encourage again. I learned from her that I could be afraid and try it anyway, that strength and courage would grow and that my life and the lives of others would change.

I treasure every single moment I spent with her, over nearly 30 years. She changed my life and made me who I am today. Meeting her was one of the best things that could ever happen to me and it was a true blessing to have her in my life.

Agnes Addington, At-Large member, DCNA Board of Directors, former Treasurer, DCNA. My first memory of working with Evelyn Sommers was during my first marathon negotiation at Howard. We had just completed 18 hours of negotiations and by then, around 2am, everyone was tired. Evelyn encouraged us to take a nap while she continued working. She was tireless and still full of energy at that hour. She was a great organizer. Examples of which included running the campaign for Gwendylon Johnson for President, American Nurses Association and attempting to organize Fairfax Hospital nurses. That was the first time an ANA president showed up at a union rally. Subsequently, ANA created a section for the members who worked in unionized hospitals.

Mary Jones Bryant, At-Large member, DCNA Board of Directors, former President, DCNA. Having Evelyn as our ED for 22 years was a blessing for DCNA and me. Evelyn took DCNA to a whole new level and placed us on the map in the District of Columbia and nationally. We formed many coalitions under her visionary leadership. Evelyn always paid careful attention to strengthening DCNA, promoting unity internally, and finding new leaders among our membership. She encouraged me to become the labor leader I am today and showed me the way. Evelyn focused on each local unit, making sure someone from each unit was at the table, either on the E&GW Cabinet or the Board. She encouraged me to become actively involved in organizing, representing DCNA at the national level, testifying at DC Council and to speak loudly about issues affecting labor, the community and our members. She was not a nurse, but took on our causes and understood the importance of nurses being economically stable and equipped to do their jobs at the bedside and beyond. I am forever grateful for her fearless leadership and mentorship. Evelyn also reached out in times of our personal family tragedies. She was very empathetic to whatever affected us, if she could help, she would. I will never forget the fear I had, while on strike at HUH, while I was President. She stood by my side, every step of the way, in front of the media, as I had to speak in front of the cameras. Her support was unwavering and helped all of us successfully plan and win that strike. I am indeed, a better leader and person today, because of all Evelyn has taught me.

Gwendylon Johnson, former President, DCNA. Evelyn Sommers gave strength and substance to the importance of strategic planning and internal organizing or strengthening of nursing and other groups to achieve professional practice benefits and economic goals. Evelyn wisely used the connections between politics and policy and coalition building between unions and other groups to realize gains not just related to nurses and health care, such as the District of Columbia becoming one of the first jurisdictions in the country to legislate the autonomy of practice for Advanced Practice Nurses, but also to impact many other social determinants such as Family Medical Leave, pay equity, mandatory insurance benefits, especially for women and so much more. The profession of nursing, health care delivery and communities are all the inheritors and beneficiaries of a legacy of advocacy and action that was nurtured and operationalized because of the work of Evelyn Sommers.

Karen Scipio-Skinner, Executive Director, DC Board of Nursing. As my supervisor, mentor, colleague and friend Evelyn prepared me for my role as Executive Director of the DC Board of Nursing. She encouraged me to apply for a position with DCNA which required me to lobby the DC Council. She convinced me that I could do the job and I trusted her belief in me. She guided and supported me in my fledgling efforts. With her gentle power she taught me the importance of not just lobbying in support of nursing issues but issues that impacted the patients that we care for. This direction gained DCNA the respect of the DC legislators. She taught me the importance of stakeholder participation. That they must have input when drafting legislation that impacts their health and livelihood. She was an immensely important presence in my life and I will always miss and love her.