

Women's History Month: Leona Brandes Yeager, MD

Leona Brandes Yeager, MD, 1908-1999

By Emma Florio, Special Collections Library Assistant

Leona Brandes Yeager was born on June 24, 1908, on her family's farm in Manville, Illinois, about 100 miles southwest of Chicago. As an only child, her father expected her to take over their family farm, but she instead chose to pursue a life of science and medicine. In 1929 she graduated with a BS in mathematics from North Central College in Naperville. Her connection with Northwestern began shortly afterward when she started working as a pathology lab technician at the medical school. In 1936 she married Edwin Yeager, with whom she would have one daughter, Georgia.



Yeager's medical school class of 1944 portrait, Galter Library Special Collections.

Yeager worked in pathology and then experimental medicine labs for 10 years before deciding to go to medical school. She attributed this decision partially to her uncle, Walter W. Brandes, a 1927 graduate of Northwestern University Medical School and an instructor of pathology there in the late 1920s. In 1942 she received an MS in bacteriology and in 1944 she earned her MD from Northwestern. Her residency training was at Cook County Hospital and Wesley Memorial Hospital, where she became chief resident.

After medical school, Yeager strengthened her connection to Northwestern. She joined the faculty in the department of clinical medicine while being on staff at Cook County, Evanston, and St. Francis Hospitals. In 1946 she became assistant director of Northwestern's Student Health Service on the Evanston campus. Four years later she was promoted to director, becoming the first woman to hold that position as well as the first full-time woman physician on their staff. Later in life she reflected that when she started in medicine, young adults were neglected by the profession, being too old for pediatrics and too young for internal medicine. She sought to remedy this in her work with the Student Health Service. In her 25 years as director, Yeager dramatically expanded the Service's offerings, particularly in the gynecology and mental health clinics, which went from being available a few hours a week to six days a week. She also added more doctors, diagnostic services, and a pharmacy.

Yeager continued her work in bacteriology as well; in 1957 she became a staff physician in a new virus research lab at Evanston Hospital, headed by Harry B. Harding, a faculty member in the Department of Bacteriology at Northwestern, which worked to develop a practical diagnostic test for polio. She was also involved in the professional medical community during her career. In 1963 she was appointed president of the



Yeager in the Student Health Service office, from the 1959 Northwestern Syllabus, via Ancestry.com.

American College Health Association as well as chairman of its Committee on Standards. That same year she was named an Outstanding Alumna of North Central College.

Upon her retirement in 1975, Yeager and her husband moved to Arizona. She remained connected to the medical profession as the president of the Sun Cities Physician Club and director and board member of the area's Center for Health Aging Studies. She maintained ties to Northwestern as an Alumni Regent from 1987 to 1991. Northwestern University honored her with its Service Award in 1992.

Leona Yeager died on November 9, 1999, in Peoria, Arizona, at age 91. In recognition of her outstanding legacy, a medical school classmate, Margaret Gerber, and Gerber's sister Kathryn established the Leona Brandes Yeager Scholars Fund at Northwestern to benefit two female medical students annually.

Selected References

"Alum unfurls quilt of career experiences." *Ward Rounds* 8, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 34-35.

"Alumna Leona Yeager leaves mark on the University she loved." *Ward Rounds* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1999-2000): 35.

