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Remarkable Women of UNMC: Dr. Mary Jo Henn

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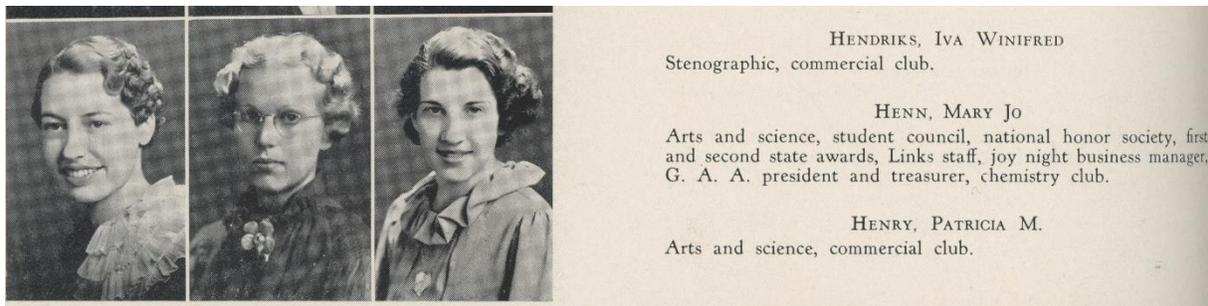
Dr. Henn “is the reason I’m here,” says Dr. Ward Chambers, who is now a professor in the Department of Health Services Research & Administration. He completed his degree in electrical engineering in 1967 before deciding he wanted to attend medical school. Dr. Chambers went to see Dr. Mary Jo Henn, who was the assistant dean of Student Affairs. She got him a job in Dr. Robert Stratbucker’s lab. Dr. Chambers attended classes at UNO for chemistry prerequisites and later earned a master’s degree as well as his M.D. Dr. Anne Kessinger, professor emerita in the section of Oncology and Hematology, has a similar reason for arriving at UNMC. Dr. Kessinger, as a student at the University of West Virginia, discovered that Dr. Henn held an important faculty position at UNMC. She felt that was indicative of an environment at UNMC that was more welcoming to women in the field and ultimately decided to do her internal medicine residency in Nebraska. Dr. Henn influenced countless others in a similar manner over the course of her career.

Mary Josephine Henn (always known as Mary Jo) was born on January 14, 1919 in Fargo, North Dakota. She was the daughter of Joseph and Myrtle (Wise) Henn. Mary Jo had a brother, James, who was seven years older. She was a distant relative of Alois Alzheimer, now known for the eponymous disease. Joseph Henn was a teacher and school superintendent, but later worked as a manager for International Harvester for more than 40 years. At one time, he served as an assistant football coach under Alonzo Stagg.

Mary Jo was always interested in sports — her niece, Pat Wright, recalls getting Mary’s tennis racket when she was around 12 years old. She also recalls her aunt’s jars in the basement

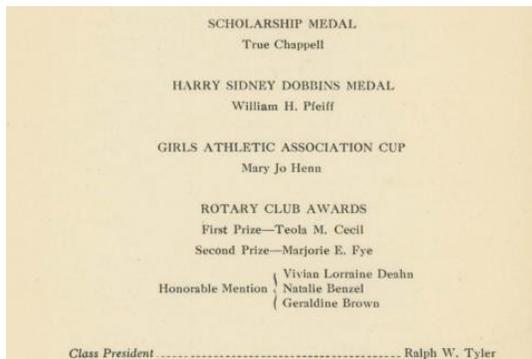
with “critters” in them. She could look at them, but not touch. “Even though she didn’t always want to play with paper dolls, build block houses etc., when she came to visit us she always did those things with me.” Wright recalled summer vacations in Minnesota with three generations of the Henn family together. During her year as an intern, Dr. Henn spent many weekends at her niece’s house and became, “almost like a second mother to me.” She added, “I can’t say enough good things about her.” Later in life, Dr. Henn visited her niece in California when she attended medical conferences in San Francisco. “She was a very generous lady and a very good friend.”

Mary Jo Henn graduated with honors in her class of 498 students from Lincoln High School in Lincoln, Nebraska in 1936. The Lincoln High School *Advocate* newspaper mentioned her



Mary Jo Henn’s high school yearbook photo

athletic activities several times during her senior year. She played basketball and was captain of

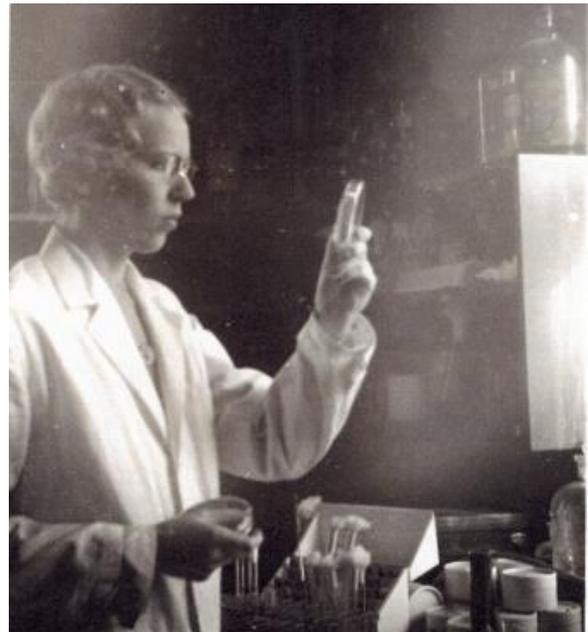


Page from the program of the 63rd commencement exercises from Lincoln High School on June 12, 1936 (the Rotary Club Awards were for the best looking and finest made dresses)

the girls’ “interclass swimming meet.” She was president and treasurer of the Girls Athletic Association (GAA) and she received a GAA letter. She was also editor of the girls’ sports section in the *Links* yearbook and was the recipient of the Girls Athletic Association Cup at her Senior Class Day Assembly in honor of her scholarship, school service, and all

around sportsmanship. In addition, she was elected to the National Honor Society and was business manager for Joy Night, the school talent show. She was in the chemistry club and a locker inspector.

After high school, Henn obtained her BA from the University of Nebraska in 1940, where she was a member of the Delta Delta Delta Sorority. After graduation, she attended the School of Medical Technology at the Medical Center and worked as a medical technologist. She later obtained a master's degree in microbiology from the University of Minnesota in 1944. World War II disrupted her plans to pursue a PhD. At that time, the University of West Virginia in Morgantown needed a microbiologist, since male candidates were being drafted. She traveled there after Christmas in 1944, with the thought that she could work on her doctorate on her own time. She was the assistant to Dr. Robb Spaulding Spray, known as the "Father of Medical Bacteriology" at the West Virginia University. Coincidentally, Dr. Spray, who had one of the leading collections of *clostridium* and anaerobic bacteria in the country, was a native of Omaha.



Undated photo of Dr. Henn examining a culture dish in the microbiology lab

Dr. Henn felt that Dr. Spray, "did not appreciate women." Regardless, she soon assumed the duties of Dr. Spray and became the only full-time member of the department of microbiology after he had to limit his activities due to declining health.

Henn taught a course in medical bacteriology for medical students at West Virginia. She also helped develop a school for medical technology. She taught a lecture course and a laboratory course, using her experience as a medical technologist when she worked with Dr. Millard Gunderson, professor of pathology and microbiology, at UNMC. To help with her workload in Morgantown, Henn recruited Dr. John Slack in 1946. Slack, had a PhD in microbiology, and his first position had been as an instructor at UNMC, before joining the military. Dr. Slack was acting chair of the department and later became the full-time chairman until his retirement in 1972. He later wrote a book about the history of the Department of Microbiology at West Virginia University.

While she was in Morgantown, the dean at West Virginia offered Henn the opportunity to attend medical school part-time and continue teaching. However, she felt that this would take too long and she made an appointment with Dean Charles Poynter at UNMC. Dr. Poynter had been Professor of Anatomy since 1910 before his appointment as dean in 1930. Dr. Poynter was a “one-man institution” and was director of the hospital as well as the medical school. He appointed faculty whose names are still familiar to us including A.L. Bennett, E.A. Holyoke, and L.S. McGoogan. Dr. Poynter was “the entire admissions committee” and accepted Mary Jo Henn on the spot as a medical student after a single interview and without the need for applications, committees or MCAT scores.

Henn entered UNMC medical school in 1946 and was one of only three students in her class to graduate with honors. Her 1950 class graduation photo shows her beside the only other



Portion of photograph of Dr. Henn's medical school graduation class

woman in the class of 76 students. When she started medical school, she lived in an apartment in the basement of Dr. Gunderson's home. Dr. Gunderson is said to have provided financial support to many other students during their careers. The house was located behind the Phi Rho Sigma fraternity house. Fraternity members would throw snowballs at him as

he walked to work and police were called on more than one occasion. Henn was inducted into the Alpha Omega Alpha Honorary Medical Society during her senior year and was president of the Nebraska chapter. During medical school, she assisted on a publication concerning bacteriological control in poultry boning plants. She also played a major role in a study demonstrating superior antibacterial properties of a hexachlorophene-containing bar soap (Dial®), compared with standard bar soaps. In 1972, the FDA removed hexachlorophene from the market after reports linking this product to neurologic abnormalities in infants. Dr. Henn complained about similar actions dealing with food additives, saying, "Pretty soon we won't be able to eat anything or drink anything."

After medical school, Dr. Henn did a one-year internship at the Research and Educational Hospitals at the University of Illinois, located at the site of the old West Side Grounds where the

Chicago Cubs won the World Series in 1907 and 1908. After her internship, she trained in internal medicine at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota until 1954. She began her training in the



Dr. Henn at her medical school graduation with her brother, James

Plummer Building, which is now designated a National Historic Landmark. The building is known for its 16-foot bronze doors, carillon and offices of Will and Charlie Mayo. Henn's interest in endocrinology began during her tenure at the Mayo Clinic. She worked with physicians who were involved with the first clinical use of cortisone for rheumatoid arthritis. She also worked with Dr. Edward

Rynearson, who had just been elected President of the Endocrine Society.

The Mayo Clinic offered Dr. Henn a position after completing her training, but she "wondered what I could do on my own," and received an invitation to do a presentation at UNMC. Dr. Robert Grissom had recently joined the medical staff before becoming the first full-time Chairman of internal medicine in 1957. Dr. Grissom hired Dr. Henn in 1954 as the second full-time internal medicine faculty member and the first woman. After Henn, Dr. Grissom hired Fred Paustian, and then J. Calvin Davis. Henn was hired as an instructor, and in 1956, she was promoted to associate, a title that is no longer used. In 1959, she advanced to assistant professor, and then associate professor in 1964. She assumed the role of assistant Dean of Student Affairs in 1963 and she became a full professor in 1970.

Dr. Henn became the acting director of the dispensary clinics for the college of medicine



Dr. Henn lecturing at UNMC

in 1958. She published articles on a variety of topics related to endocrinology including hypothyroidism, hypoparathyroidism and diabetes — her main interest. She later published articles about nutrition education and the admission policies at the College of Medicine. She also saw private patients during her early time at UNMC,

charging \$3.50 for an office visit.

One of Dr. Henn's most noteworthy achievements was the founding of the Obesity Clinic in March 1963, along with Dr. Vernon Ward and Dr. Robert Muffly. Dr. Muffly was a psychiatrist and Dr. Ward was an internal medicine physician who traveled to Omaha from his private practice in Kearney. Dr. Ward later joined the staff at UNMC before entering private practice again at Clarkson Hospital. Dr. Henn had several observations that were ahead of their time. She recognized that obesity is not always due to overeating, according to a 1965 article in the *Omaha World Herald*. She noted that as many as 30 percent of adult patients do not lose weight, despite diets that would mean starvation for others. She used the term "metabolic obesity" and recognized that there was something unique about these patients. She said, "I have come to believe that some patients just make fat regardless of diet." She also recognized these patients had metabolic abnormalities that were indicative of latent or potential diabetes.

The clinic had no budget and operated out of borrowed space. The clinic promoted a “nibbling diet” where patients ate six or more small meals daily. This diet was based upon laboratory studies showing benefits in rats. Patient also received thyroid supplementation and intermittent doses of diuretics. A 1969 medical student thesis by Chester N. Paul, who later directed the Burn Center at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Lincoln, noted that some people had significant weight loss with this regimen, although the average was only a little more than 6 pounds after a 2-year follow-up.

Dr. Henn could be blunt and she used coarse language at times. She is also remembered as being “a lot of fun” and as an advocate for the students. In a UNMC publication, she noted the varying background of medical students and the fact that they did not all major in science at college. She praised students’ involvement in civic, community and national affairs. “I am quite impressed with today’s students — their maturity, motivation and initiative,” she said. The men of the Phi Chi Medical Fraternity named her a fellow brother. She received a Certificate of Appreciation from the senior class in May 1972, and a Courage and Humor Award from the class of 1974. She received a Certificate for Outstanding Service from the class of 1977, and a Citation of Merit for her many outstanding contributions and services at the commencement ceremony in December 1980. She also received a Certificate of Appreciation from the Nebraska Chapter of the Student American Medical Association.

In May 1967, medical students staged a friendly sit-in in Dr. Henn’s office. At the time, the only athletic facility on campus was a half-court for basketball in the basement of Conkling

Hall. The students were protesting the lack of a place to play sports and exercise on campus. When interviewed for a 2011 article in *UNMC Today*, Dr. Robert Wigton said, “Dr. Henn seemed to get a kick out of the students invading her office.” It was not until 1996 that the Center for Healthy Living was built. That was the same year Conkling Hall, constructed in 1923, was demolished to make room for the Lied Transplant Center.



Dr. Henn lived in the Fairacres neighborhood in a house with her

Dr. Henn at her desk during the medical student sit-in (Dr. Robert Wigton is on the left holding the sign reading: Students for Recreation)

parents. She drove a Cadillac and was a heavy smoker. When her niece was in ninth grade, her Aunt Mary Jo offered her \$200 if she would not smoke until age 21. For Christmas, Dr. Henn always asked for a blouse with a pocket big enough to hold a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She had a backward-running clock in her office and she kept a piece of Memorial Stadium artificial turf from the 1970 Cornhusker national champion team. She loved circus clowns, and she kept a card in her pocket calendar that read “QUITURBITCHIN.” Dr. Fred Paustian once confided to Dr. Anne Kessinger that he was quite chagrined that the only person who could drink him under the table was a woman, referring to Dr. Henn.

Dr. Henn was also active in the larger Omaha community. In 1962, the Omaha Business



Dr. Henn alongside the famous circus clown Emmett Kelly

and Professional Womens' Club named her Outstanding Woman of the Year. She served on the boards of the Nebraska Arthritis and Rheumatism Foundation as well as the Nebraska Diabetes Association. She also served on the Aging and Blindness committee of the United Community Services. She was president of the local chapter of the Altrusa Club, the first service club for executive and professional women. In the 1960s, she served as treasurer of the Governor's Status on Women

Commission for governors Frank Morrison and Norbert Tiemann. During that time, Senator Fern Orme tried to pass LB 787 regarding equal pay for women, although the bill did not get past committee.

Dr. Henn retired in 1979 due to poor health and died on February 1, 1981 at age 62 due to complications thought to be related to multiple sclerosis. She is buried at Calvary Cemetery in Omaha. Dr. Grissom was one of the casket bearers at her funeral. In 1990, the class of 1975 established the Mary Jo Henn Memorial Scholarship Fund. The scholarship continues to be supported and will be awarded in perpetuity. It supports as many as five medical students each year based upon academic performance and financial need. In her oral history, Dr. Henn said, "I'm very proud, sincerely, to be a graduate of the University of Nebraska College of medicine. I could stay at Mayo but I came here and I'm not sorry."

Dr. Henn's oral history was recorded by Bernice Hetzner, professor emerita of library science, on August 10, 1979: <https://unmc.access.preservica.com/>

We are also grateful to the following individuals who provided archival material and interviews:

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