



GOOD MEDICINE: Marilyn Liota started her nursing career 57 years ago, visiting Lower East Side tenements.

Bringing NYC a healing hand

I ALWAYS knew I'd be working forever," Marilyn Liota says, smiling. After all, she'd married a musician.

At 81, Liota has been a widow for nine years — and she's in her 57th year on the job. She's spent all that time with the same employer, the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, a 116-year-old community health agency where she began as a visiting nurse in 1952.

Liota was a teenager growing up in East New York, Brooklyn, when a book by VNSNY founder Lillian Wald changed her life. "The House on Henry Street" was a compilation of stories about nursing on the Lower East Side, full of intimate portraits of people in great need. The young Liota was deeply moved by how in-home nursing changed lives.

"I always wanted to teach, be a social worker or a nurse, and I just couldn't decide," she says. The way she saw it, being a visiting nurse meant not having to choose.

So after graduating from nursing school at Columbia University, she started working the Lower East

Side, climbing tenement stairs with a black bag in hand.

Did real life match the book? Liota's voice fills with tenderness, and she says, "Oh. Oh, it certainly did."

Reaching down beside her desk, she presents a large photograph of a nurse kneeling in front of an old woman in a railroad flat. "This is one of my first patients," she says. "This is typical — little, dark one-bedroom in the back, bathtub in the kitchen."

When Liota started, VNSNY's primly skirted nurses could be seen climbing over the rooftop dividers between buildings.

"If you had an appointment on the fifth floor of one building and then the sixth floor next door, it was easier than climbing all the way down and back up again."

Nurses had to be adaptable in other ways. Each building tended to house people from one immigrant population, a community clustered into a vertical block. Change buildings, change cultures. A nurse had only her knowledge, her wits and the contents of her bag: a thermometer, paper towels, an apron, a hat and whatever medications her patients might need.

When visiting parents with babies, Liota carried a butcher's scale and a cloth.

She'd settle the infant in the cloth — imagine the classic image of a stork carrying a baby — hook the fabric onto the scale and, hoisting the scale aloft, weigh the infant. To make bandages, family members tore up sheets and baked them with a small potato; when the potato was done, so were the bandages: sterile.

Maybe it's work that has kept Liota young. Close your eyes, and you could believe you're listening to a 30-year-old. Open them, and you'll be certain you're looking at someone in her 60s. Moving briskly around her office — decorated with her own watercolors — the small, solid Liota looks like anything but an octogenarian.

Initially, she and VNSNY had an on-and-off relationship. During symphony season, she toured with her violinist husband. When they returned, she went back into uniform.

She worked across the city: Harlem, The Bronx, Queens. Working in people's homes, Liota learned that successful care involved cultural awareness — working with people "in their structures, at their levels," as she puts it. Over time, populations shifted again and again. There were always new lessons, fresh challenges.

In the beginning, Liota's duties included giving shots, exercising muscles, providing education. What a doctor ordered, a nurse gave.

Now, medications are delivered, as are IV stands, monitors and anything else a patient needs. There are mounds of paperwork — gone are the days of showing up, giving care, collecting a modest fee and going on to the next home. Gone, too, are the days of guesswork; today's nurse

carries a tablet computer offering instant access to medical records.

Liota has also changed. She's risen through the ranks, collecting many titles: senior adviser, field instructor, supervisor, district director. Today, she works in Queens, teaching, planning and supervising 400 people. It's been a

while since she's leaped across a rooftop, but as far as Liota's concerned, she hasn't left her dream job.

"It's the same thing on a different level," she says. "Essentially, you're dealing with a patient. If you have to heal a wound, you're healing a wound."

To the extent that it involves stepping back

from work she's spent a lifetime immersed in, reflecting on her career presents some difficulty, says Liota. But she has no trouble at all when asked if she'd chosen well.

"I could never regret a second of it," she says. "How could I have missed doing this?"

— Seánan Forbes

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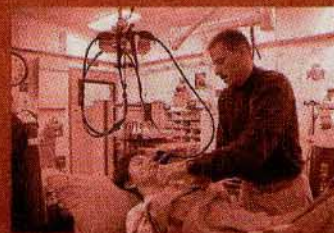
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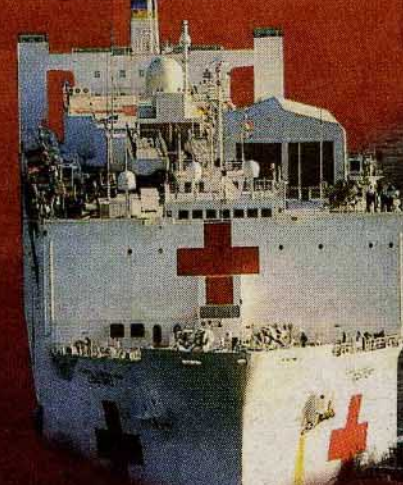


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