

Shirley Muhenthaler Recalls Her Long Career at DMACC

It is hard to believe that DMACC is approaching a 50 year anniversary.

I joined the staff a few days before classes started at Center One in West Des Moines in the fall of 1967. I was hired to teach in the Medical Assistant and Operating Room Technical programs. Student enrollment in the programs kept increase as opening day approached. None of us had taught before, and for the most part there were no textbooks or teaching aids for our specialized programs.

The first day of classes arrived. We had tables and chairs and had developed a bare bones curriculum outline and lesson plans for a few days. In other words, we were flying by the seat of our pants in this new endeavor, truly the pioneers in the Area schools.

Within a couple of weeks, my dear friend Lois, who had been hired to head the Medical Assistant program earlier in the summer, decided that teaching was not what she expected or felt comfortable with and resigned. We were also required to begin taking classes at Iowa State University to qualify us for a teaching certificate. More challenges!

The building itself presented some challenges. If we wanted to show a film (which required turning off the overhead lights), the lights went off in adjoining classrooms. There were shouts over the classroom dividers (that were far short of reaching the ceiling in this former grocery store), but somehow we adjusted. The students in the Marketing program (mostly the boys) delighted in sending messages via paper airplanes over the dividers to the girls in the health programs. We were also caught up in ordering lab equipment and reviewing books, keeping in mind that we would be moving to a permanent campus in Ankeny in a few years.

This was another task—designing the program space we would have there. Most of us had young children at home who required our time and attention. Life was very busy, but we were young and had lots of energy. We went to view what would be the Ankeny Campus on a cold, wet and windy day. We hopped over fencing and cow patties to witness the event, and I am sure that none of us had any idea of what DMACC would become. It still boggles my mind every once in a while when I drive onto the campus, which is still growing.

In addition to the lighting problem there were only two small restrooms—one for each sex. Since our programs in the building were probably 80 percent female, restroom demand, especially after lunch, was a problem. Someone found a solution—attach a sign that said men on one side and women on the other and attach it to the men's room. Occasionally someone forgot to tip the sign before using the restroom, which created a problem. Once our building maintenance man, who was a very nice, quiet and reserved man, happened to be using the facility and was trapped in a stall for almost an hour. He didn't want to embarrass himself or the girls by making his presence known.

Classroom space was limited. In order to provide management skills for our students, a portable classroom, equipped with typewriters, was in a remodeled trailer that was parked outside the back door directly behind the building. As the seasons changed, it became cold and windy but attracted a fair number of funny, four-tooted creatures (mice). There were frequent squeals when students entered this classroom.

In 1969 our program moved to the Ankeny Campus. Since the new health building was not quite completed, we held classes in the temporary buildings on the “lower” campus. It was truly amazing when we finally occupied our new facilities and had a wonderful lab set-up with adequate office space and large restrooms.

The buildings were in the middle of what had been a cornfield, so there was nothing to provide any sort of wind break when the winter weather hit; when it rained we dealt with muddy surroundings. And we were again invaded by field mice. My fellow instructor in the Medical Assistant program was usually a very serene, laid-back person. When one of the critters strolled into her office, I think a new low-jump record was set as she landed on her desk.

Once we were settled, the next item on our agenda was to become an accredited program with the American Association of Medical Assistants and the American Medical Association. The only accreditation available was for two-year associate degree program—ours was a one-year diploma program. It took a lot to convince these organizations that we could and did provide an education in one calendar year that met their requirements. Program accreditation would allow our graduates to sit for the certification test immediately following graduation. Without program accreditation, graduates would have to work for two years before sitting for the test and being designated as Certified Medical Assistants (CMA).

Medical offices had previously hired registered nurses (RN’s) for patient care and individuals with secretarial and management skills for front office duties. The CMA was a relatively new concept. These individuals would have educational backgrounds that would qualify them to work in all areas of the office. Because of the liability issues, it was important that our graduates would have proof of their qualifications to perform duties in the office. It took some time to convince the medical profession that our graduates were prepared to fulfill these requirements.

We prepared a very detailed analysis of our program as required by the AMA and AAMA. Two years later we received on-site evaluation from both organizations that resulted in our program and one other in the country to be the first one-year programs to be granted accreditation. Graduates of the DMACC program have consistently achieved scores that rank them near the top nationally. I later was honored to serve on accreditation teams for five years, evaluating curriculum and visiting schools that had applied for accreditation.

The next professional growth experience for me was becoming more active in the Iowa and American Vocational Associations (IVA and AVA). Eventually I served as president of IVA and later regional vice president of AVA, which included being a member of the AVA Board of Directors. These offices provided me with another opportunity to learn about colleges and programs in other states. I also was able to spend time in our state and in Washington D.C., promoting the value of vocational/technical education.

There were many memorable events, not always related to our teaching duties. Friendships were formed, many of which became long-lasting relationships, almost like second families. Because we were small in numbers, we had social events for the entire staff.

Throughout my career at DMACC, I was fortunate to have the support of various college administrators to pursue and participate in professional activities in Iowa and regional and national settings. Who could have imagined that a fifteen minute interview in the former Ankeny Post Office with the college

superintendent (CEO) Paul Lowery would open so many doors for me? I enjoyed ALMOST every minute of my long career.