

*From Henry's Desk:*

## Sue Hirt By Henry Holland

Susanne "Sue" Hirt is well known to many of the members of our support group. Sue consented to an interview with me in November 1999. She served in the Department of Physical Therapy at the Medical College of Virginia (MCV) from 1945 to 1982. Because of her position, Sue was at MCV during the great epidemic polio years of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Sue was the Director of the School of Physical Therapy for thirty years from 1952 to her retirement. There were twenty to forty students in each class and Physical Therapy was a two-year training program at that time. Sue Hirt's life story is one of courage and perseverance.

Sue was born in Berlin Germany in 1913 to Jewish parents. Her father had married previously with two children by his first marriage. Sue also has one older sister, Margarete. Sue and her sister currently reside together in western Henrico County.

When Sue was eight years old, her father died. She completed high school in Berlin at age seventeen. She wanted to become a medical doctor. In Germany at that time, a medical degree required seven years of study, three years of pre clinical study and four years of clinical study.

In Sue's first year of basic science training, she was interested and skilled in the dissection of a cadaver. This training would be of value to her later in her career. She completed the three years of pre clinical training and had begun study in organic chemistry.

In 1933 Adolph Hitler came to power in Germany. Sue was forced from the University and left for Switzerland. She took a course in exercise. In 1934, she went to Vienna, Austria to enroll in a two-year gymnastic course to become a teacher.

In 1937 while in Austria, Sue saw Hitler at a distance. Hitler was marching down the street. She saw him out of a window that was facing the street. Fortunately for Sue, German authorities never got her passport. She then accepted a job as a nanny for a German family in Turkey. She cared for the couple's three-year-old son. In 1938, Sue successfully immigrated to the USA.

Three years later, with her medical knowledge and interest, she entered the school of Physical Therapy at the University of Wisconsin. There she gained the respect of Dr. Frances Hellebrandt. In 1942, she completed her studies and also became an American citizen.

At this time, German born citizens had difficulty finding employment in the USA. The University of Wisconsin created a job for Sue in their Department of Physical Therapy. With her interest in anatomy, she taught anatomy to Physical Therapy students.

During her time in Wisconsin, Sue met Sister Elizabeth Kenny and attended some of her courses in the treatment of polio patients. She tried to learn as much as she could about the Kenny approach to polio patients. Sue also learned the value of hot packs in the early treatment of acute polio.

In 1944, Dr. Hellebrandt was recruited to the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond, Virginia to start a school of Physical Therapy. In 1945, Dr. Hellebrandt asked Sue to join her at MCV and Sue began her long association with MCV.

During the first fifteen years of Sue's tenure at MCV, polio was occurring in epidemic numbers in Virginia. Statistics from the Virginia State Health Department reveal the following data:

Year	Number of Reported Polio Cases
1945	335
1946	143
1947	173
1948	567
1949	337
1950	1200
1951	267
1952	690
1953	740
1954	613
1955	336
1956	237
1957	107
1958	159
1959	290
1960	58

As you can determine from these statistics, 1950 was a major epidemic year in Virginia with 1200 reported cases of polio. Several members of our support group, including myself, contracted polio during this epidemic year. Sue was at MCV during all of these epidemic years after 1945.

Sue's older sister Margarete also successfully left Germany and lived in England during World War II. She also immigrated to the USA and was employed in the

social work field. Margarete worked twenty years in Cincinnati, Ohio and came to Richmond in 1975. Sue and Margarete's mother died under Hitler's regime.

When the Central Virginia Post-Polio Support Group began in 1986, Sue became an early supporter and advisor to our group. She continues to be a resource for our group. Sue remains busy and she is a Feldenkrais practitioner. She still continues to treat patients today. Sue has devoted her life and skills to the service of others. We are blessed that she has been and continues to be a part of our support group.

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