

Trailblazing Baptist woman turns 100

December 10, 2012

It was a cold winter's night in 1971 when 6-year-old Monica Phillips developed a terrible earache on a family visit to Abilene, Texas.



Virginia Connally at her 100th birthday party at the Abilene Women's Club. (Photo by Loretta Fulton)

"I had these earaches fairly often and they were quite painful," Phillips recalled.

But the pain and fear Phillips felt that December evening faded after her aunt called a local doctor who, to everyone's amazement, agreed to treat the little girl immediately.

"This was very late on a cold night," Phillips told ABPnews. "I believe Dr. Connally left a Christmas party to meet my mother, my aunt and me at her office."

Virginia Connally's standard claim to fame is that of Abilene's first female doctor. But it is personal encounters like Phillips' that show why Connally has been dubbed "a spiritual giant," and why Abilene and the wider Baptist world were ecstatic when she turned 100 on Dec. 4.

"Her care for her patients - for her that was a calling," said Phil Christopher, Connally's pastor at First Baptist Church in Abilene.

It was her impact, not her long list of firsts, that led Hardin-Simmons University to [hold a reception](#) for the 1933 graduate on her birthday. A [community-wide party](#) thrown for her Saturday was attended by some 400, including Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, and Bill Arnold, president of the Texas Baptist Missions Foundation.

And her church, where she has worshiped since 1933, honored her during services on Sunday.



Virginia Connally (Photo
by Abilene Reporter-
News)

Meanwhile, her doorbell and phone were ringing non-stop last week as a century's worth of friends and colleagues sought to hear her voice and wish her well. By the end of the week her living room was impassable because of all the flowers.

Even the media hounded her.

Connally humbly absorbed the accolades.

"As you live a life of faith, you're not looking for the results," Connally said. "I was just doing the things that God planted in my life and heart."

Seed of faith

Connally said that first seed was faith - and that of Baptist Christian - was planted a century ago.

"I think it came with my birth because I was surrounded by a Christian family and they were all believers and we were regular in our church attendance," she said of growing up in Temple, Texas.

And it was at church, Connally said, that she likely first got the idea to become a doctor.

"At First Baptist, Temple, where I grew up, the doctors and nurses held leadership positions and they were active and we looked up to them," she said. "Who wouldn't want to be like them?"

So it was a pretty big deal in 1940 when Connally opened an office in Abilene. But there was little controversy about it, she said, because most of the city's other physicians had left for military service.

"There was only one other doctor (still in Abilene) and he was old and quite crabby," said Connally, who retired from medicine in 1982.

‘Pioneer without equal’

Other professional milestones include serving as the first female chief of staff of the Hendrick Medical Center and of the city’s former St. Ann’s Hospital, [the Abilene Reporter-News said](#).

She was also the first woman president of the local medical association, said Pat Evans, executive vice president of the [Taylor-Jones-Haskell-Callahan County Medical Society](#).

All of those firsts are most important because they cleared the way for other women to practice medicine in Abilene and in Texas – and also to dare to pursue other professions once deemed men-only, Evans said.

“She was a pioneer without equal,” Evans said.

Servant leader

Christopher said Connally has made an equal impact in Baptist life. She’s led by example through consistent support of the [Baptist World Alliance](#) and by championing mission work through local, state and global Baptist organizations.



Virginia Connally is interviewed during a birthday reception at Hardin-Simmons University, where she graduated in 1933. The event was held in the school's Connally Missions Center, which is named after her (Photo provided by HSU).

At Hardin-Simmons, she established the Connally Endowed Chair of Missions and the lead donation in what is now called the Connally Missions Center at HSU.

“She’s had that kind of servant role in our church, too,” Christopher said.

She was in the first group of women elected deacons at First Baptist in 1997, and provided the inspiration for a \$4.1 million missions campaign in 2009.

“After we had been through three capital campaigns for needed renovations, it was Virginia who said ‘if we can raise this much for a sanctuary, why can’t we do it for missions?’”

Example of humility

But you’d never know such things about Connally without asking, said Loretta Fulton, author of the 2011 biography titled [*Virginia Connally, M.D.: Trailblazing Physician, Woman of Faith*](#).

Fulton learned that firsthand in doing research for the book. One example: Her visit to the Texas Medical Association archives uncovered documents about Connally the organization didn’t know it had.

“They were unaware of her existence,” Fulton said. “Here she is, this oldest living physician in Texas and the first female physician in Abilene, and nobody knew that.”

Nor does Connally make a big deal about her friendship with Lyndon B. and Lady Bird Johnson when they were in the White House. The relationship developed through her second husband, the late Ed Connally, an oil executive who became chairman of the Texas Democratic Party in 1959.

“They were tight with the Johnsons, but even in that world she never let it go to her head,” Fulton said.

‘A way of life for her’

Connally’s friends say everything about her – her career in medicine, her passion for missions and her humility – are born from a God-first approach to life.

That also drives her continuous thirst for learning and a famous generosity, said Gail Thames, a fellow member at First Baptist.

Connally has showered books on Thames and her husband, who is also a physician, and with others in the congregation.

“She always wants to share with others,” Thames said.

Connally also has a heart for youth, Thames added.

“She is always thinking of new ways she can reach young people with the gospel and with new technology,” Thames said.

And also with older technology: Every spring she gives a copy of Oswald Chambers’ [*My Utmost for His Highest*](#) to each graduating senior, Christopher said.

But it goes far beyond that, he said, to being a servant leader in the church by always being there and encouraging others.

“It’s not limited to the ministries of the church,” he said. “It’s a way of life for her.”