

Health care beginnings nearly a forgotten legacy

History project salutes health care
leadership of religious orders

They are the health care pioneers of western Pennsylvania, but their contributions were in danger of being forgotten until John Bavaro, a Slippery Rock University health services administration faculty member, took up their banner.

They are the Roman Catholic sisters from 16 orders who staffed the hospitals, nursing homes and orphanages of western Pennsylvania from 1847-1969. They were women of extraordinary compassion, spirited vision and faith – religious leaders and innovators who frequently introduced new services and technologies.

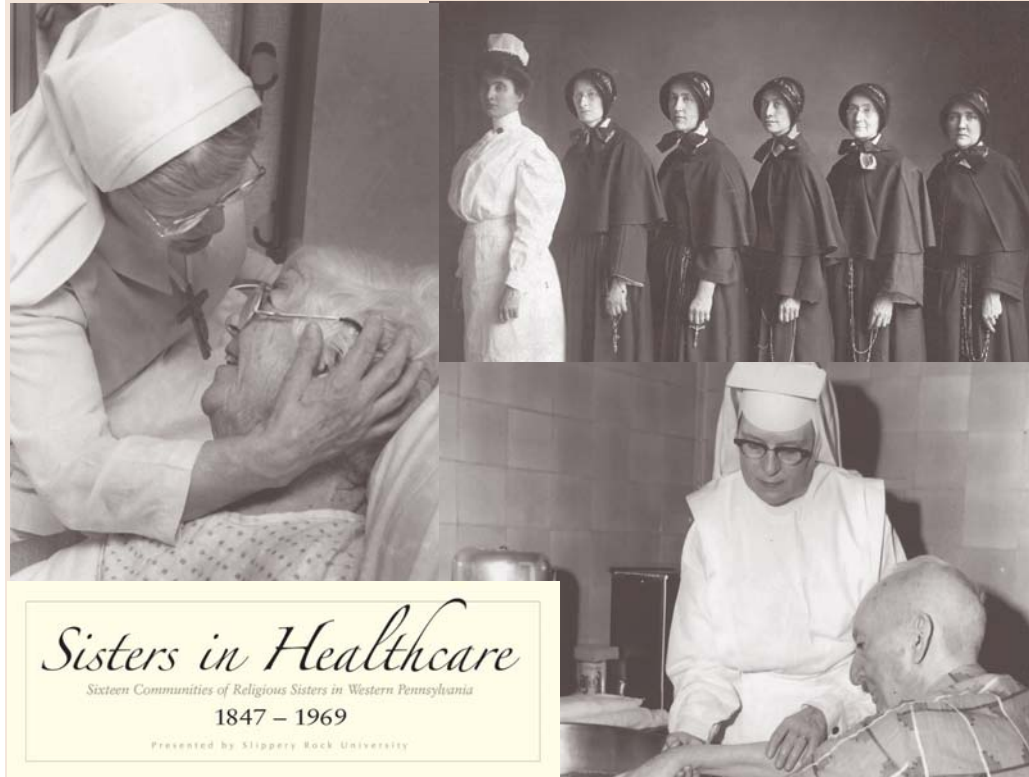
“Our current health care system in western Pennsylvania and across the nation owes a great deal to the foundation created by these sisters,” Bavaro said. “The sisters founded Pittsburgh’s first hospital (Mercy Hospital) in 1847 and were involved in advancements in the use of anesthesiology, the polio vaccine, the first in-patient drug rehabilitation center, generic drugs and even developed a prototype for managed care in the 1930s which was later adopted by BlueCross Highmark.”

Slippery Rock University pays tribute to the sisters, most of who were unrecognized – known only to their families and their orders – through The Sisters in Healthcare History Project. The project, coordinated by Bavaro, consists of 16 historical display panels, one for each order, and one representing an overview of all of the orders.

The project promotes awareness of the sisters’ struggles and successes in establishing a formal health care system at a time when few others were meeting needs. They cared for hundreds of thousands of patients, gaining ground in educational, health care and social institutions. The sisters and the work they accomplished represent a valuable source of women’s history – but their history was threatened to be lost forever.

“Through our project, it is our intention to make sure this does not happen,” Bavaro said. The project relies solely on contributions supporting research, design, preservation and exhibition expenses. Slippery Rock University Foundation Inc. owns the collection, largely amassed by Bavaro with help from the sisters and individual benefactors.

Roman Catholic sisters showed characteristic grace in working tirelessly as nurses in western Pennsylvania at a time when few others were meeting health care needs. SRU’s Sisters in Healthcare History Project honors the pioneer healers.



Sisters in Healthcare
 Sixteen Communities of Religious Sisters in Western Pennsylvania
 1847 – 1969
 Presented by Slippery Rock University

Bavaro said the collection is the largest of its kind in the nation. It encompasses more than 100 artifacts, including historical clothing, medical equipment and hundreds of photographs. “To our knowledge, our project is the only one in the country that is completely dedicated to the contributions made by the Roman Catholic sisters,” he said.

Sisters’ leadership shines

The first display opened recently at the Regional Learning Alliance educational facility that SRU administers near Pittsburgh. The display showcases clothing worn by nurses. Medical artifacts include a wooden crutch used by a soldier during the Civil War, a blood pressure device from the 1920s and a sick call set from the early 1900s used to administer last rites.

The exhibition is a fitting tribute of the sisters who lived their understanding of the Christian gospel by caring for people regardless of race, creed or ability to pay.

“John Bavaro has done a wonderful job of getting the display together,” said Sister Louise Grundish of the Sisters of Charity in Seton Hill. “The sisters of the past did a lot of innovative things. Sister Anna Regina

Luckett, a sister of St. Joseph of Baden, fashioned one of the area’s first oxygen tents made out of wicker basket, ham wrapper and a thermometer...and it worked. Sisters would often give up their own beds in order to take care of the patients.”

Patients seek personal touch

Bavaro said many people in those early years felt safer going to the hospital knowing they would be cared for by sisters. At their peak, the sisters operated more than 30 of the region’s hospitals and nursing homes and opened numerous schools of nursing and allied health.

“The original health care work done by the sisters was done in response to the need of the time,” Bavaro said. “Our exhibit captures some of those times. Society’s needs have now changed and so has the current work of sisters. However, our project will ensure that the significant work they did will not be forgotten.”

Students describe experience as invaluable

History graduate students Carla Parish, Marisa Rowe and Rock graduate Sue Mraz are consolidating the exhibit to display the artifacts of the individual Catholic orders. They have also made reproductions of clothing and learned about the sisters’ history.

“I joined the Sisters in History Project because I thought it would be a great opportunity to gain hands-on experience with museum quality artifacts and to learn computer software used by museums for cataloguing,” Parish said. “It was not long before I realized the work was far more than just experience for a future job. It was really about gaining recognition for 16 orders of caring, courageous Roman Catholic nuns.”

Students have constructed mannequins – hands, arms and heads – that are necessary for displaying the religious and nursing uniforms worn by the sisters.

“My area of interest is American women’s history. This project is helping to preserve that history,” said Mraz, ’06, master’s in history. “During my internship, I took digital pictures and wrote descriptions of the artifacts we have in the collection. After graduation, working part time, I developed the technique for sewing the material around the Styrofoam mannequin heads to give them a professional look and helped make the pattern for the hands and sewed them together.”

History graduate students Marisa Rowe of Saxonburg and Carla Parish of Slippery Rock prepare a mannequin for exhibition.



The Sisters in Healthcare History Project was born out of the realization that no serious recognition had ever been given to the hundreds of Roman Catholic sisters who worked as nurses in western Pennsylvania from 1847-1969. The project relies solely on private funds. Contributions cover research and exhibition expenses. To help support the project, contact John Bavaro, professor of health services administration: 724.738.2265, <http://www.sistersinhealthcare.org>