New Women's Center Pays Tribute to P&S Pioneer

THE HEADLINE IN THE MAY 1962 issue of Stethoscope, a newsletter for the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, read, “P&S Banned Women Students Until Along Came Gulli Lindh.”

It was Dr. Gulli Lindh Muller whose efforts opened the door to women students at P&S, and she was among the first women admitted in 1917. She finished first in her graduating class of 120 students in 1921.

Today’s female P&S students have taken steps to keep her name and her legacy alive by creating The Lindh Muller Common Room, a women’s resource center for the medical center. Three third-year students and five second-year students developed the center with both male and female faculty members from the health sciences campus. The center is supported by donations from the alumni association, the dean’s office, and individual donors.

“The center is intended to be a meeting place and drop-in resource center for all CPMS students, staff, faculty, and alumni to promote excellence and inspire advances in the research and delivery of health care for and by women,” says Kristen Savola, a member of the P&S Class of 1993 and one of the organizers.

Specifically, the center will develop, maintain, and advertise resources available to women in the health sciences at Columbia; address issues of concern to women in the health sciences; provide resources for the advancement of health care for women; and open avenues of discussion between women and men.

Working out of the Alumni Relations office at P&S, the students are planning a fund-raising campaign to establish an endowment of $25,000 for the center. They received donations from generous alumni and faculty to fund preliminary planning.

The student organizers were inspired by the persistence with which Gulli Lindh pursued her dream to attend medical school at Columbia. From the time she was a little girl in Sweden, she wanted to be a doctor. In New York she attended Barnard College, finishing in three years.

With the help of Dean Virginia Gildersleeve at Barnard, the P&S hopeful started a campaign to be the first female student at the medical school.

Despite many visits to P&S by Samuel Lambert, the Barnard senior could not persuade the dean to accept her application. “On one occasion, he immediately said that he was going to show me why women could not be admitted.

“First, we went to the anatomy dissecting room. Around the walls were several conveniences for men in open view. Then he explained that there were no restrooms suitable for women and no place where women could hang their hats.”

Dean Lambert told the young woman that if $50,000 could be raised to make improvements in the physical plant, he might consider accepting women into the medical school.

A fund-raising campaign collected only a few thousand dollars. A deadline approached: By July 1, she had to decide whether to accept an offer to attend Johns Hopkins’ medical school.

Dean Gildersleeve to Dean Lambert: “Look, Dr. Lambert,” said I, “here is Gulli Lindh now forced to plan to go to Johns Hopkins. Can’t you take her in anyway on faith that the $50,000 will ultimately turn up? If you don’t you will be sorry in the years to come, when she is a distinguished medical scientist, that you forced her to study medicine away from her own University.”

Dean Lambert was swayed. Gulli Lindh and 10 other young women were admitted in 1917. Dean Gildersleeve’s memoirs reported that an anonymous gentleman donor from Texas, encouraged by two sisters who were physicians, had pledged the $50,000.

After an internship at Presbyterian Hospital (she was one of the first two women interns), Dr. Muller, who married James Muller in medical school, was a member of the P&S faculty until her husband became a professor in Cambridge, Mass. After that move, she became a researcher, laboratory chief, teacher, and author of an introduction to medical sciences that had four editions. Her research was published in several scholarly journals.

She died at age 82 in 1972.