# Martha’s Story—Transcript

Martha: My name, for the audience, is Martha and I have a lifelong love of learning, which I think is important for everyone. I attended university and got several undergraduate degrees for various reasons, but they did help to guide me in all the things I do in my life and is very, very helpful. And now I'm retired. I am a senior and I'm coping with this new stage of life, which is very complex and can be very intimidating because you don't know what to expect. And you're more aware of your longevity and wondering what's going to happen next.

Today I want to talk to you a bit about my life story, which includes speaking briefly about a few aspects of my childhood to where I am now as a senior who is retired. I will discuss some important milestones in my life and the lessons that I learned from them in helping me to move forward. So when I was born, I was a failure to thrive infant. My mother formula fed me and I could not tolerate it, unfortunately. She did not breastfeed, which is more the norm today. Then I could not tolerate solids. So SickKids helped my mother with both the formula and the solids issue. And to this day, throughout life, that is one of my main issues. What can I eat and what can't I eat? But, I have been remained fairly healthy.I have an optimistic attitude, which definitely helps in life and I recommend that to everyone. Remain positive and try to get rid of the negativity, which doesn't help.

One of my first memories was my aunt who had a piano in her living room. And I was just mesmerized by this piano, and would look at the notes and think, "How do you figure out which note on the paper is a note on the piano?" And so I asked for a piano over several years and my grandfather finally bought me one. So music was an important part of my life and still is today. I followed the University of Toronto conservatory program and I did the exams up and to including grade 10, which is almost the highest level except for ARCT. I also took the history and music courses, which counted as one credit for grade 13, so that was wonderful. I was entered in several Kiwanis Music Festival competitions by my teacher, because she knew I was very shy. And I got to play a carillon of bells, actually 12 bells. I was able to play different hymns and melodies by transposing all the different keys to C major. And so the whole city would hear me when I was playing the bells.

I also loved singing as well and I sang in the choir for 10 years when they finally began to accept women. I was eight-years-old. And I sang in other choirs, the university choir, a girl choir, and I loved it. I also taught piano for several years part-time. But I always wished I could play by ear like my aunt did, so I couldn't entertain people, I needed to have the music in front of me. When I was in doing my grade eight exam, my music teacher, unfortunately told me that my fingers were too short to ever be a concert pianist. But that wasn't my wish, but I was devastated.

So went to university. I did not know what I wanted to do. At that time, women were not given high expectations. What I learned is that you could be a secretary, a teacher or a nurse. My parents didn't have the opportunity to attend college or university. My mother was 11-years-old when World War II began and my father was 15. He signed up for the army at 18 years and my mother began working at 16 years of age to support the family. She was the fourth child in the family of seven. Women in those days were expected to raise families while the father brought in the income. There was also no birth control then, so families were quite large. I was the eldest of five children.

Then in high school, for grade 13 I focused on the arts. I loved languages. I took French for four, five years, Latin for five years and German for one years. I could not schedule in the Greek. Latin is a really helpful language for learning the different meanings of English words and other languages. For instance, to pugnacious means to be in a fighting spirit, from the Latin [Latin 00:04:59], to fight. So I found five years of Latin helped me so much with my English.

I was not confident about doing well in the sciences, and most women were basically told or geared towards the arts in those days. My chemistry teacher drank milk in class for his ulcers, which is not an effective treatment now. We now know the bacteria, H. pylori is responsible for many ulcers. He was a very boring teacher, unfortunately. And I did pass chemistry, but not with an exceptional mark. But later, when I decided I wanted to become a nurse and possibly a doctor, I took a leave of absence from work at the hospital and took night courses to do all my 13 sciences, all the algebra, calculus, relations and functions, which includes geometry, trigonometry, biology and chemistry. I actually got the highest mark in chemistry. We were in a class of nine people, seven boys and two girls, and myself and the other girl, or I and the other girl got the highest mark. I got 96, because I had an excellent chemistry teacher this time. I was motivated because I knew what where I wanted to go and it made all the difference in learning. So it shows you that you should never give up and you should not hear what other people say, that women won't do well in sciences, because they can do well.

But I went to university, because my parents did want us to all have an education. They really didn't care what we studied as long as we went to university. And I didn't have a clue when I finished grade 13 what I wanted to do. So I decided to study English lit and phys ed, mostly because I loved to read and I was fairly athletic. I was in track field in high school, I was a good runner. I joined the swim team my first year of university. Because I had a bronze medallion, I also took the rigorous instructors course my first year.

When I was ready to go to university, I realized I really still didn't know, at the age of 18, what I wanted to do or what life path I should choose. Number one, I realized I did not want to be a music teacher. And later on you'll learn, because I was scared about writing a paper. However, I had a lot of fun studying music. I had to learn at least one instrument from each family of instruments. I was not very good at violin and when my profs switched me over to cello, I blossomed. So that also is a lesson that you should never give up. You also have to follow your gut instincts and take time to reflect on what you really want to do in life. That does not mean that we cannot change our minds along the way. Today there are so many opportunities out there for men and women, and many of our learned skills can be transferrable.

By the way, when I entered university, I learned a hard lesson. Our English high school teacher did not teach us how to write a paper or article. I had the same teacher for five years who focused exclusively on grammar. Yes, I do know my grammar, but I struggled to learn how to write a paper. However, I did not give up and I eventually improved gradually and eventually wrote very good papers, and had confidence.

After my music degree, I worked in the music department at my university for two years. I got to interview guest musicians for the university radio. There I met some people who would become famous, Ivan Reitman, the director of Ghostbusters and other movies, Dave Thomas and Martin Short of Second City. And you also probably know Martin from a lot of his movies, Father of the Bride, for example. I also got free tickets, as a student, to attend the full series of symphony concerts each year. I met the Czech String Quartet members who I had interviewed on the university radio and even attended concerts with them in Toronto. It was a wonderful experience. It was a great time for me because music teaches you so many things. I encourage all parents to have their children learn some music, because you learn how to multitask. You have to think of phrasing the notes you're going to play, the fingering, the dynamics. It's a very challenging art, but it really stimulates the mind and I think helps it to grow.

That was a great time, but I still lacked direction. So one day, after two years of the music department, I walked into St. Joseph's Hospital, in the same city, as I had reflected on the fact that I like to help people and I was interested in health topics. However, my lack of confidence in the sciences was still a mental barrier. I got a job that day working for their internal medicine residency program, which included clinical clerks, interns, residents and fellows. I also worked with many of the senior doctors there. I scheduled all these doctors for the floors of the hospital, so for when they were on call. I typed up all the reports and so on in many fields, hematology, cardiology, respirology, nephrology, pharmacology and so on. The doctors knew that I had a degree and they taught me a lot. They eventually suggested I apply for medicine, but I felt I needed to have the science basics. So as mentioned above, I went back to get my grade 13 sciences, I applied for the BScN degree and I studied for four years and graduated summa cum laude.

They were upset that I did not go for medicine. However, I feel nursing is a wonderful profession and you did get to work with the patients more. And you learned valuable relationship skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills and so on. Some people actually go into nursing with a view to then going on to medicine.

Just forgot to mention some of the excellent opportunities I also had in the hospital with the internal medicine residency program. I had a lot of part-time jobs, because I was living in an apartment. So I typed ECG reports on the weekend. I worked for a cardiologist to finish up the letters that his office assistant hadn't been able to do during the day. And I learned a lot about medicine.

Well, so when I was in nursing as a student, I did learn a lot of valuable skills and I learned to write some excellent papers. There was one professor in particular that was a good mentor for me. For one of my placements in the third year and after I graduated, I worked in the spinal, stroke and head injury unit. I mainly worked with quadriplegics. The majority of them were males who had chosen some high-risk behaviors, unfortunately, that made them completely paralyzed. It was demoralizing for them and their families, physically, emotionally, in every way you can possibly think. And as a nurse, I learned a lot of skills, not just the physical skills, because I had to catheterize them, et cetera. Anything you can think of, I had to do for them because they couldn't do it for themselves. But the social and emotional part was so important. I realized that they had lost a lot of their identity, their physical identity, loss of control. When they had to do certain routines, they had their own space in the hospital, but that could be a hospital bed with curtains. And people violated those boundaries as well.

Some people aren't aware that doctors often go on to do different degrees as well. And I had some doctors at the hospital, which was a teaching hospital, coming over from different countries and studying to complete their PhDs in a medical topic. So I would type their thesis and I would stay after work. There was one German professor, in particular, he had a complex thesis. He had to have it typed in three weeks. We didn't have computers back then, so if I made a mistake, I had to use Wite-Out. And so it was more complex and difficult to type a PhD thesis than three weeks. So I was there until two or three in the morning sometimes trying to get this done. But it was a really good experience for me and I learned a lot, because as I said, I didn't understand some of the topic. I found out what it meant, I asked questions or I read. So I learned a lot of medicine and science even before I went into nursing. So I thought that was important to mention, how different experiences can compliment other experiences.

I also loved my placement in obstetrics, and eventually you'll learn that I was mainly on the pediatric and obstetrics floor as a manager for the last, well, for five years at least. And then I was focusing as a nurse manager and in for the next 15 years.

So after that, back to the spinal cord and stroke, head injury unit. I worked mainly with quadriplegics, as I had mentioned. And most of them were men who had practiced some high-risk behaviors, usually when they were inebriated, unfortunately.

So a lesson that I learned was that we have to somehow educate our children in school for a lot of different topics that I learned along the way. I think we should be teaching them about parenthood, relationships leading to marriage. They learn and they absorb like sponges when they're young. We should teach them about public health and the importance of vaccine.

Some of these men, I got their stories, which I used for a paper that I wrote. One of them had been at a, they'd been at his house at a party. And when they were inebriated, a few of them decided to jump from the top of their garage into the pool. And the host of this party missed, and he broke his neck. And he was quadriplegic, which usually they're around C7. If you're around C1, two, three, you can die because you won't be able to breathe. It's an awful experience. I actually met a friend of my cousin's from another town who came in. And he had become quadriplegic because he was on Lake Erie in a boat with friends drinking, and the boat drifted over a sandbar. And he dove into a sandbar and broke his neck, so he was quadriplegic for life.

There weren't as many paraplegics, the majority of them were quadriplegics, who have no use of their arms or their legs and they weren't able to do any of the activities of daily living, especially evacuation. So I had to learn a lot of physical skills as a nurse, like catheterizing them every day several times so their blood pressure wouldn't go through the roof. And emptying their bowels in a way that made them feel comfortable, because to them initially it would be embarrassing. In fact, they used to joke about it after a while. Because it was a rehab, they were there for months. And so I got to really know them well as well, and they got to know me, so that did help the comfort level. But they also had a chance to tell me what they were going through. Of course, they were going through depression, a sense of helplessness, isolation. Actually, one of them, speaking of depression, took his wheelchair, it was before my time, and this hospital was on the top of the mountain and they went over a cliff in the wheelchair. They committed suicide because they couldn't handle the change in their lives. So a lot of them had families too who it impacted, and so I got to know the families as well.

So I decided to write a paper that this prof had said I could write, and it was about loss of identity control in many spheres, physically, cognitively, emotionally. They didn't have their home anymore. Their home was a hospital bed surrounded by curtains and people invaded those boundaries. There were the routines they had to follow. One young man, who was slightly mentally challenged, had gotten upset once because I asked him if he could take his meds. He says, "No, I'm always being to take my meds at this time or that time. I don't feel like it." So we have a talk about it. I said, "That's okay. Let's leave it for now, it's not going to hurt. Have your breakfast or whatever it would be. And then choose a time when you can take them," and he would. So you had to be sensitive to their needs and what they were going through. And I gave them some sense of control back when I wasn't demanding it. And the nurses learn that and you shouldn't demand it, you have to be thinking of the person you're working with.

So I learned a lot about human relationships. I learned a lot about how to communicate with them, how to communicate with different patients with different needs. How to make them feel comfortable, how to make them feel better, to trust you, that you cared about them as individuals. So it is a very demanding profession if you want to be a good nurse.

I know doctors are busy, but the ones who did just take maybe another 30 seconds to be a little more personable and to show that they care, they've come closer to them, they come up to them. They would say, "Okay, how is it going? Tell me what you need." They formed a better relationship in those extra 30 seconds than the people who didn't take the time to do it. So those are the types of lessons I learned and what I observed, which were really helpful for me as a nurse.

So that was a good placement. After I graduated, I worked there for 13 months, and then I moved out of the city, so I was no longer there. Obstetrics was the other placement that I had done a lot of work in and I liked very much and I liked public health. So one of my first jobs was in public health as a generalist nurse. We did everything. However, I did focus on doing most of the clinics while I was there. They were called child and family health clinics. I went to the clinics where you gave immunizations, was a big part of it, especially for the Mennonite and Amish population. I would do Cambridge, Kitchener, Elmira in the basement of a church and Linwood in a community center. So we had to take our cooler with our vaccines and our epinephrine, in case there was a reaction, with us and our documentation, et cetera. So it taught me a lot of skills too in working with people. And of course, a lot of the children that I immunized too, have to learn how to comfort them and make them less afraid of the vaccine. So that was another good experience, doing that.

Public health is health that a lot of people don't still understand. We're always trying to explain what public health is. And since the pandemic, I understand people still don't understand what public health is.

After I moved and I did five years of public health, there was a lot of teaching involved, I realized that I wanted to know more about how to be a good patient educator or teacher. So my husband and I had our son about the time I applied for medicine. I found out as soon as I was going for the interview that I was pregnant. So medicine never came to fruition and it was partly because I was older, and I was ready to have a child. Then I had to integrate my home life and having a child.

I must say that having a child was one of the most wonderful milestones in my life. Being a mother, I'm thinking a lot of people are afraid to have child sometimes and bring them into this really complicated world, just getting more complicated all the time. But I think that's what life is all about when you get older. It's to have children that love you unconditionally and that you love unconditionally, and that you can raise to be good human beings. But I think society has to support us more.

I had a wonderful career. I didn't get to tell you all of it. But it's important that you keep your mind open to different possibilities. So when I was teaching in the hospital as a patient educator clinician, I realized that it's important to have those teaching skills, and so I went back to teachers college. And then later on I did do my master's as well, which helped me with my job that I had as a manager, is including I took epidemiology, I took urology, which gave me a good understanding. I understood more about public health, which a lot of people don't do.

So in summary, I worked as a nurse clinician for five years, they made that job redundant. Then I was in obstetrics and pediatrics as a manager, acting manager when she was [inaudible 00:23:07] to the CEO. And I was mainly in obstetrics, helping to do, I developed practice guidelines. I was the lead in documentation for public health. I was always the lead in documentation, because documentation's very important. And then I went on to do 15 years of management in public health for the children's program, as opposed to being population-based. There was one on one home visits, et cetera, et cetera. We worked in the pre-birth clinics and post-birth clinics. I helped to develop training programs from that, best practice guidelines, so there's a lot of research involved. So I had a really well-rounded career that stimulated me and I was constantly learning, and hoping to pass that learning on to others.

So, keep your mind open to possibilities. If one job falls through, try to remain positive and say there's another opportunity that might be even better. So never give up. Always believe in yourself. Lifelong learning is important, but it can be enjoyable. Don't get stuck in a rut. If you're in a rut, try and find the courage to try something else and get out of it. A lot of people live their whole lives angry and depressed at the job they have. You don't want that to happen to you, it isn't nice.

So I'm thankful for a lot that happened to me. Of course, I didn't mention all the negative things that may have happened. But what got through was trying to keep optimistic, trying to stay positive, trying to look for other opportunities and never giving up. So I hope that this information will help you as you travel through the different phases of your life and so that you can be happy individuals and have a holistic life with your family, with your friends, and in the workplace. Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you.