



The Second in a Two-Part Series

INEZ PRUITT: *From Out of His Shadow*

by Laura Emery, Field Editor

It was Christmas Eve of 1987. Dr. David B. Nichols had asked E. Inez Pruitt – one of five children born to a retired waterman and a stay-at-home mom – to come work for him as his medical assistant. “What will I be doing?” she asked.

“Everything” was the gentle doctor’s succinct reply.

The day Pruitt accepted the position as medical assistant for the esteemed doctor was the day life changed dramatically for the Tangier native.

“I was excited. I’d always wanted to be a nurse,” she reminisces. The dream was cultivated at a young age when Dr. Isaac White of the Eastern Shore would occasionally commute to Tangier and

spend the night in her family’s home. During his visits, he would take the curious six-year-old with him on house calls. The impressionable young Pruitt soaked up the experience. “After that, I knew I wanted to be a nurse,” she says.

But life took a different path when, during her 11th year of high school, she decided to drop out of school and marry her first and only love interest, Jerry Pruitt. For the time being, her dream of being a nurse was put on hold. But, she insists, it was “always there.”

Soon after being married, Pruitt went to Tangier’s only doctor (Nichols) for a birth-control prescription. “Yep, I went to him for birth control. I think I was one of his first patients here,” she recalls with a chuckle. Less than a year later, Inez and Jerry were expecting their first child; and after a complicated pregnancy, she gave birth to a healthy baby girl (Anna Pruitt-Parks).

Two years later, Pruitt became pregnant again. “I loved being a mom,” she says. “But, still, I wanted to be a nurse.”

Then in 1984, Pruitt accepted employment with a dentist that Dr. Nichols had brought over to the island. After Pruitt had worked as a dental assistant for three years, Dr. Nichols



Inez Pruitt stands beside the sign marking the entrance of the David B. Nichols Health Center. The late Dr. David B. Nichols’ name plate is still outside the door. When she’s not working, Pruitt loves spending time with her three grandsons and reading.

asked her to come work for him. He wanted Pruitt to learn a variety of different skills to increase efficiency at the small Tangier clinic with its limited staff. “His philosophy was that if someone got sick and they needed someone to do something in a certain area, everyone had to learn almost every area of the clinic. You had to learn how to troubleshoot, how to do vital signs, how to assist in minor surgeries, how to equip everything, et cetera,” she explains.

It wasn’t long before Pruitt’s respect for the skilled doctor turned into admiration, and then ultimately blossomed into friendship. “He was just such a giant in my eyes,” she says softly,

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in her Tangier accent. “I was in awe of his intelligence.”

Nichols believed in Pruitt even when she didn't believe in herself. He encouraged her to go back to school and pursue her degree in nursing. “After putting my daughter through nursing school, it just wasn't cost-effective for me to go too. So when I came across some information for a Physician Assistant program, I was excited. I presented it to Dr. Nichols and he reviewed it and said, ‘This is just perfect. This is such an answer to prayer.’ He said, ‘You go do it.’ And so I did,” she says.

Pruitt commuted from Tangier to the University of Maryland – Eastern Shore (UMES) in Princess Anne, Md., most every day of the week. “I wouldn't get back until late in the evening by boat. And then once I got into the professional program, I lived in a motel room and then rented a room from a friend of mine in Salisbury and would stay there Sunday night until Friday evening,” Pruitt says.

But, it was worth the extra effort. Pruitt had fallen in love with the profession and there was no turning back. “I love getting to know patients, and understanding how the human body works. I enjoy making a difference in the lives of others. The world should be a better place because a person has lived. I have so many people who have made a positive difference in my life, and I admire that,” she reflects.

When it came time to do family practice and clinical rotations as a part of the program, Pruitt decided to work at Dr. Nichols' White Stone practice. “As a result, I got really close to a lot of the girls over there,” she says. “We even established a ‘girls' night out.’”

In 2004, Pruitt became involved in an ongoing project to get a new clinic built on Tangier. It all started when a friend of Dr. Nichols (Jimmie Carter) came to dine with the Canadian-born doctor for lunch on the quaint island. After a tour of the Tangier clinic, Carter couldn't believe the condition of the building and equipment. For the next five years, Nichols, his friend Carter, and the Tangier Island Health Foundation

worked to raise \$1.7 million to build a new clinic. “My participation primarily involved being a representative of Tangier and spreading the word and helping out with fundraising,” Pruitt explains.

It was during this period that Pruitt took it upon herself (after being introduced to the contest by a friend) to nominate her mentor and friend as Country Doctor of the Year for a contest sponsored



L-R: Inez Pruitt with Anna Pruitt-Parks, LPN, her oldest daughter and physician assistant, and Cindy Parks, office receptionist. “We all graduated from the Nichols School of Hard Knocks,” says Pruitt.

by a Texas-based healthcare company called Staff Care. Dr. Nichols had faithfully commuted to the island once a week from his White Stone practice – every week for nearly three decades. He did everything from house calls to emergencies. “He had given so much of his time and energy to his patients, practice, and Tangier,” she says.

A few months later, Dr. Nichols received a phone call from Staff Care. The company had called to notify him that he was in the “final four” and that they needed a telephone interview and an in-person interview to make a final decision on the winner. When Pruitt was told about the call, she was shocked. “I knew he deserved it, but I also knew he had a lot of competition,” she says. “He later called me into his office and said to me, ‘You nominated me for an award?’ I remember laughing and saying, ‘Oh yeah. I did!’”

On December 15, 2006, Pruitt finally graduated from UMES after six years of hard work. And Dr. Nichols ultimately received the award less than a month later for Country Doctor of the Year, setting off a publicity firestorm. “It was crazy,” Pruitt says. Once he won the prestigious award, the recognition garnered Nichols wide acclaim as news outlets highlighted the rural doctor for his selfless work. And behind the story of the humble doctor was always

the side story of his protégée – the woman he'd been mentoring for the last 20 years.

Nichols' longtime dream was finally realized when the new state-of-the-art David B. Nichols Health Center opened its doors in August 2010, just a month after Nichols was diagnosed with a terminal disease. After he announced the prognosis of his cancer, the people of Tangier showed their support by showing up in droves to the dedication of the Tangier clinic.

He had previously survived melanoma of the eye and been healthy for six years, but then learned that the cancer had spread to his liver. He was given four months to live. It didn't take long for the devastating news to spread around the small island. “It hit the island hard,” says Pruitt.

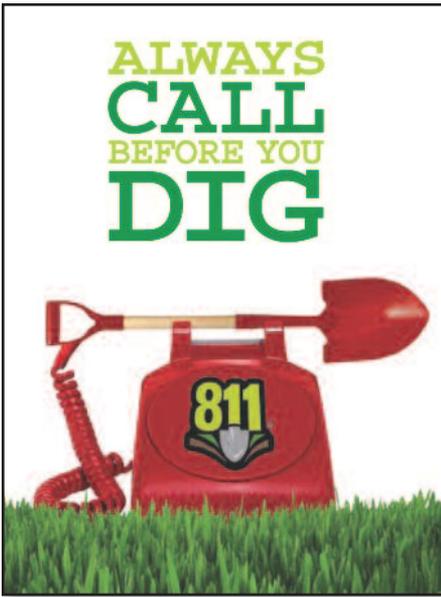
But it's evident that Pruitt was even more affected. When Dr. Nichols broke the news to Pruitt, she says, “We both just cried.” She sits behind his desk in the new clinic more than a year after Nichols' passing. Nichols lost his battle with cancer on December 30, 2010. The late doctor's name plate is still outside the door. “I just had so much respect for him. He was someone to model one's life after ... a truly good person,” she says, dolefully.

While Dr. Nichols is no longer at the clinic, his presence is definitely still felt – especially by his understudy – Pruitt – who has finally come out from his shadow to shine on her own as the island's first native licensed medical-care provider.

“I'm doing what I love to do. But,” she says, “I will always remain a reflection of him.”

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