

# SAINT MARY'S SCHOOL

## Alumnae Profile Series

### Mary Lawrence Hicks '78C

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#### The Impact of a Caregiver

Mary Lawrence Hicks '78C is a dedicated and compassionate caregiver who has treated patients diagnosed with HIV/AIDS throughout her career. Beginning in the early 1980s, as the epidemic was burgeoning in New York City, her work as a public health practitioner helped address the needs of people with AIDS. As her career progressed, she remained at the forefront of the chronic health crisis, helping patients live as long as possible and die with dignity as research and treatments eventually led to successful disease management. After graduating from Saint Mary's, Mary Lawrence continued her education, followed her passion for nursing, and made an impact in the communities in which she lived and worked.

#### Building a Foundation for the Future

Mary Lawrence Hicks grew up in Greenwood, S.C., learning about Saint Mary's from her paternal grandmother, Mary Clark Smith Hicks '1914C. Later, their family's friends, the Connors, shared Saint Mary's stories. Sisters Cathy Connors Stuckey '77C and Marcy L. Connors '75HS '77C went to school with Mary Lawrence and then onto Saint Mary's just as their mother Ruth ('52C) had done. It was during Mary Lawrence's senior year of high school that the girls invited her to visit the campus for the school's spring May Day celebration, and Ruth drove her to Raleigh for the visit. Pulling into the Grove, Mary Lawrence remembers becoming instantly 'hooked.'

"We had all attended a large, regional high school, and I had nearly 700 people in my graduating class," she recalls. "During graduation rehearsal, I looked around and realized I'd never even seen some of these classmates. So, the chance to be in a small environment, completely opposite of what it was like in high school, and in a single-gender environment was exactly what I wanted."

At Saint Mary's, Mary Lawrence was welcomed as a member of the Granddaughter's Club and joined the Cold Cuts. She was also in the Scottish dancing troupe and recalls Saint Mary's winning the North Carolina State Fair's top prize for Scottish dancing.

"I played the maracas alongside Beth Ryan Winstead '78C. Her twin sister Etta Ryan Clark '78C played the bongos," she says laughing. "We had a lot of fun and played not only for Saint Mary's, but also at lots of other places – at UNC Chapel Hill and around town. We'd pile into cars; someone always had to bring the washtub! And, off we'd go."

Mary Lawrence says her years at Saint Mary's promoted the development of lifelong friendships.

"We valued our environment and the programs, clubs, and organizations we were all in. We were also encouraged to place great value on relationships," she explains. "I think because of the Episcopalian environment, and going to chapel together twice a week, that our core beliefs were solidified in compassion and connection. The sense of community, the respect we developed for each other, how we learned to listen and care about other opinions and views; it all played an important role in our growth and development."

For her, it provided a strong sense of community. "Our class felt the love and strength we brought to each other, and our friendships were essential. We supported each other in everything we tried, failed, and accomplished."

After graduating from Saint Mary's College with a two-year degree, Mary Lawrence enrolled at Sewanee, The University of the South, where her father had attended. "He graduated with a degree in English. I loved literature, so I majored in English, too."

While at Sewanee, Saint Mary's reached out to its alumnae and held a contest to select a school motto. The motto would be added to the ribbon below the school's crest and remain part of the institution's official seal. The unveiling would occur in 1980 during the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Alumnae Association. Mary Lawrence decided to participate.

"I sent in my submission, which was, 'Friendship. Scholarship. Leadership.' I chose this because at Saint Mary's, women developed lifelong friendships, learned from their academic programs, and this

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resulted in leadership opportunities and leadership development. When looked at like an equation, it was: friendship + scholarship = leadership.”

She won the contest after a committee representing faculty, administration, students and alumnae selected hers from the 20 submissions received. The administration translated it into Latin as the phrase: *“Scientia Fides Amicitia.”* Translated back, it became “Knowledge. Faith. Friendship.”

That same year, Mary Lawrence graduated with a bachelor’s degree in English from Sewanee. She then left for Europe.

### *Global Experiences Light a New Path*

After graduation, Mary Lawrence spent her entire first year abroad. “At the time, if you were under the age of 26, you could get a Eurail Pass for a reduced rate, which was good for three months.”

She traveled with a friend, and when the time came to return, Mary Lawrence decided she wanted to stay; she took a job as an au pair in Rome, which allowed her to work and live there for an additional six months. While in Rome, Mary Lawrence’s parents received a package for her, which was from the Peace Corps.

“I’d applied while in my senior year at Sewanee, and they wrote to me to ask me if I was still interested in keeping the application active,” she says. “I wrote back and said ‘Yes!’ because I wanted to keep traveling and experiencing the world.”

In the summer of 1982, Mary Lawrence left for her Peace Corps assignment in Morocco. “I spent a year teaching English in a Moroccan public high school and a second year teaching mentally disabled students, aged 9-18. Then, I worked for an additional summer training replacement staff and new Peace Corps members, when they arrived.”

While living there, the young teacher also learned to speak Moroccan Arabic. It was enough to be able to converse with children, which facilitated her work in the special education classes. “During this time, I developed a friendship with a colleague from Australia. She was a nurse,” Mary Lawrence recalls. “Being involved in the community and because of this friendship, I witnessed how having basic healthcare could solve so many individual challenges – and many with just a few resources. It ignited a passion in me to serve people in a new way, focusing on health care.”

The experience in Morocco led Mary Lawrence to go back to school and become a nurse.

### *Compassionate Caregiving*

In the very early 1980s, the HIV/AIDS disease was morphing into a national crisis. In a July 3, 1981, article written by Lawrence K. Altman in the *New York Times*, its readers were told about a “strange new condition” identified as a “rare cancer seen in 41 homosexuals.” The epidemic moved to the media frontlines bringing rampant fear, early misunderstanding, and a lack of compassion from most health care workers, as well as experimental treatments that didn’t work, and even worse side effects.

Before 1984, education and prevention efforts were hindered since little was known about the disease. Then, in April 1984, French and American researchers announced they had jointly discovered a virus that caused AIDS. It was given the name Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). Unfortunately, most patients and their friends and families faced discrimination and event indignity.

In the fall of that year, Mary Lawrence returned to the U.S. and enrolled in Columbia University’s nursing program. “I arrived in New York with two suitcases and \$200 to my name,” she explains. “I started training in a program for students who already had bachelor’s degrees in other fields. We could take the clinical program in just over a year and a half to obtain our nursing degrees.”

Alone in New York, she also needed a job to help support herself and began working as a home health attendant. The role allowed her to provide in-home health care without requiring a license.

“When I took the job, they asked if I’d take HIV/AIDS cases, and I agreed,” she recalls. “At that time, there was such stigma attached to patients with this mysterious disease. Many nurses and health attendants wouldn’t take such cases for fear of becoming infected.”

Because employers had such a hard time finding staff to support such cases, Mary Lawrence’s workload became all AIDS cases. “I worked with these men in their homes, ensuring they took their medicines, helping with light housework and errands,” she says. “Sometimes, I was assigned to stay overnight to ensure patients were stable and to be there if they needed something during the night.”

The families of some patients hired home attendants to deliver their meals to them in the hospital setting. Meal trays were being placed on the floor in the hallway outside a patient’s room if they had HIV/AIDS,” she says. “The patients were often too sick to get out of bed to retrieve them. So, I was assigned to deliver the trays to the patients inside their rooms. I would stay to make sure they could eat and help them if they couldn’t.”

Mary Lawrence also spent time talking with her patients. “They were lonely and often afraid,” she explains.

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"I saw first-hand the stigma these men faced, and the lack of their basic human needs being met."

After graduating from Columbia, she went to work in the emergency room at St. Luke's Hospital on the Upper West Side near the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

"I worked the midnight to eight a.m. shift for a year and then went to work for the Visiting Nurse Service of New York where I was assigned to the Chelsea neighborhood."

Most of Mary Lawrence's cases continued to be HIV-related, with a few cancer and Lyme Disease patients in between. She would start intravenous (IV) lines for people, check existing IV lines placed by surgeons, and offer support to patients and families needing nutrition and medication infusions.

"I saw them every day and I would ask them how their pets were, their friends and family members," she explains. "I was interested in their lives – who they were and the fascinating perspectives they had."

Mary Lawrence stayed a few years working in the neighborhood, though there was an emotional toll the work exacted that resulted directly from the very nature of those close personal ties. She established caregiver relationships with patients who ultimately succumbed to the epidemic; she watched hundreds pass away. After a time, she realized she wanted to have a bigger influence on diagnosis and individualized treatment.

"As a nurse, there was only so much I could do; I couldn't diagnose or prescribe, and I couldn't change the system," she says.

In 1987, researchers took a leap forward with the first AIDS treatment drug, Azidothymidine (AZT), when it was released. Researchers had been trying to find a treatment since the HIV retrovirus had been identified in 1984. At the National Cancer Institute, Dr. Sam Broder, Robert Yarochan, and Hiroaki Mitsuya began testing previously developed drugs to see if they could be effective against HIV. Originally synthesized in 1964 as a possible cancer treatment, AZT was taken off the shelf, but in February 1985 they began testing it against HIV. After drug trials in 1986, the drug was released for treatment, offering hope to thousands. (National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases)

Unfortunately, debate soon grew over its effectiveness. Then, in April 1990, one boy's death galvanized the entire U.S. – Ryan White. White was a teenage hemophiliac diagnosed with AIDS in December 1984 after a blood transfusion. As one of the first children (and one of the first hemophiliacs) to come down with the disease, he gained national attention and became a symbol of the "misinformation surrounding AIDS and the discrimination sufferers faced" when his local school district tried to prevent him from attending classes and his parents sued. (*People*, April 1990)

The result was Congress enacting the Ryan White Care Act, now called the Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program. This became the largest federal program focused specifically on providing HIV care and treatment services to low-income people living with HIV who are uninsured or underserved. It was the kind of funding needed to help caregivers like Mary Lawrence who remained on the frontlines.

"I went back to Columbia University and enrolled in a part-time program, which allowed me to work 12-hour shifts on the weekends," she recalls.

Her career to that point had been focused primarily on HIV/AIDS patients. In the nurse practitioner program, she was able to complete a specialty in family medicine. "This program included a pediatric rotation, which helped me broaden my skill set."

To bolster her confidence in this new area, especially in pediatrics, Mary Lawrence then took a position with the Brooklyn Hospital Center Medical Clinic's family medicine center. After a year, she set her sights on relocating to San Francisco where she could dedicate her focus to the HIV/AIDS field and utilize the skills she'd developed.

In 1994, Mary Lawrence arrived in San Francisco and began working for a private practice that had an HIV/AIDS focus. Based in the Castro District, in Eureka Valley, it was an area synonymous with gay culture. "I learned how to be a nurse practitioner, which included diagnosis and treatment, as well as support."

The practice was run by a physician, but after a year he decided to retire. The practice was bought out and immediately downsized. As the last staff person hired, Mary Lawrence was let go. "It was a blessing to get laid off, because that's when I was hired at the AIDS Clinic in San Francisco General Hospital, run by the University of California San Francisco (UCSF)."

Started in 1983, the clinic was one of the first AIDS clinics in the country and is a world-renowned research center. The physicians are nationally and internationally recognized experts and leaders in their field who not only research treatments, but also practice and treat patients.

"These patients are some of the most impoverished, some with mental illness, substance abuse issues,

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and many who are homeless," she explains. "It's an unusual program that provides top care for those who normally wouldn't receive it, and I'm privileged to work in such an environment."

### *The Impact of a Saint Mary's Girl*

Now in the field for more than three decades, Mary Lawrence at times reflects on the beginning of the AIDS crisis when patients were very ill and being diagnosed was essentially a death sentence.

"I've witnessed enormous change in the epidemic, from medical advancements to how patients are viewed and treated. Today, if someone is newly infected, they get on treatment meds right away and they can live a full life span" she says, smiling. "Every now and then, I stop and think about the privilege I have working in such a gratifying field, despite the history of challenges."

Mary Lawrence also shares her belief that her Saint Mary's experience directly impacted her ability to engage at a deeper level with her patients over the years. "Saint Mary's helped me learn to prioritize relationships and I have done that with my patients. There was something about the friendships we developed in school; how we were supported by faculty and staff to develop our own identities and our connections to each other. It was our class spirit and that sense of community and responsibility to one another that were a spring board for professional relationships later."

Not only has Mary Lawrence served the communities in which she's lived, she's also worked in the international community. "Between 2003 and 2006, I made multiple trips to Zimbabwe," she explains. "It was during the time when President George Bush allocated resources as part of the International Mother and Child Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR)."

Mary Lawrence spent four years flying back and forth, spending as much as three months at a stretch, visiting, teaching, providing medicines, and educating in the classroom, including a "train-the-trainer" program at Bulawayo hospital. According to the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation report, PEPFAR is credited with "saving millions of lives and helping to change the trajectory of the global HIV epidemic."

Being a part of this effort created the opportunity to help the women and children of Zimbabwe and make a direct impact on the community she served.

"It was a fascinating and rewarding experience," she recalls. "I loved it."

### *Finding a Way Back to Saint Mary's*

Over the years, Mary Lawrence had fallen out of touch with her classmates. "There was a message here or there, and occasionally I'd send in a class note update. But, I spent years in New York City getting my nursing degree, then working there, and later moving to San Francisco where I met my husband Rhodes. Life just happened."

It wasn't until she was invited to a regional alumnae event in San Francisco by the Saint Mary's alumnae and development office in 2016 that she reconnected with her school and friends.

"After that lunch, I was reenergized. They invited me to drop by campus for a tour the next time I was in NC to see family, and in 2017, I did just that. I was welcomed back, saw my former Hall Counselor Mary Virginia Swan '77C, and toured the Chapel, Smedes, Bratton, and all places new and old. It brought memories flooding back."

The next year, 2018, was her 40<sup>th</sup> college reunion. In the lead up to it and during Reunion Weekend, she reconnected with classmates and the group picked right up where it had left off four decades earlier. "It was then I felt called back to get involved."

Her class had the largest reunion turnout, and the group gifted to Saint Mary's a new lamppost for back campus. At the reunion lunch, the women were again inspired after learning about the Saint Mary's Class of 1968's memorial scholarship it had endowed for the school.

"We in the Class of 1978 college wanted to make a big impact as they had done, and we decided we needed to start right then," she explains. "That way, when we come back for our 45<sup>th</sup> or 50<sup>th</sup>, we'll be able to give an endowed scholarship to Saint Mary's and ensure tomorrow's students are provided even more opportunity."

Classmates Martha Murphy '76HS '78C, Martha Boisseau Mattheisen '78C, and Wimberley Burton '78C joined with Mary Lawrence to spearhead the endowment campaign that honors fellow classmate Liz Wright James '78C. Liz was diagnosed in 1991 with multiple sclerosis (MS). Just three short years later, during a routine check-up for her three-year-old, identical twin boys, Matt and Will were diagnosed with muscular dystrophy (MS). The James family has said, "From the outside looking in, our family's situation may look tough. But, from the inside looking out, our family sees the best in people."

Their family has not only inspired their entire community, but also Liz's entire Saint Mary's class.

"Our class has an enduring bond which started when we were teenagers that has been maintained over the years; and we've stayed connected in a deeper way than we might have had we been at co-ed

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school.” says Mary Lawrence. “This scholarship endowment is just one example of our bond to each other and a way to honor one of our own.”

Throughout the years, she has remained a consistent donor to Saint Mary’s Annual Fund and is a passionate advocate for her alma mater. And, she’s also active in her own community through her church where she is on the Vestry of St Mark’s Episcopal Church in Berkeley.

She and Rhodes sometimes “get away from it all” by staying right there in the Bay area. “We love stand-up paddle boarding and we sometimes golf. We also go to the theatre and the movies, and I still love to travel.”

In fact, it was at Saint Mary’s that Mary Lawrence became interested in theatre after participating in a drama department production directed by her Physics professor, Harry Callahan. “We all laughed because he had the same name as the Clint Eastwood character in ‘Dirty Harry,’” she says, smiling.

Today, she often travels back to New York to see a Broadway show. She also keeps an annual subscription to the SF Opera and she loves visiting art galleries and museums.

Mary Lawrence truly embodies the spirit of Saint Mary’s women who are resilient, intelligent, resourceful, passionate, and nurturing, and who are educated to make a difference in their communities and the world. And, we are grateful.

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