

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITA ELEANOR MAXINE BENNETT

Eleanor Maxine Bennett was born July 14, 1915 in Beaver City, Nebraska and died on December 23, 2008 in Madison. Following her graduation from Cambridge High School in 1932, she remained in Nebraska to attend Hastings College for four years, graduating in 1936. She then taught high school algebra, geometry, biology, general science, and physical education, and she served as assistant principal at Ansley High School from 1936-1937. Choosing an uncommon path for women at the time, Maxine entered Medical School at the University of Nebraska in Omaha. When she graduated in 1942, most graduates went on to serve as physicians in the military. This opportunity was denied to Maxine and the other three female graduates—although they could have served as nurses! Maxine then moved to Madison, where she completed an internship at Madison General Hospital and a seven-year ear, nose, and throat preceptorship with Dr. Wellwood Nesbit allowing her to successfully complete board exams in 1949. By 1950, she was appointed medical director of the Bureau for Handicapped Children in the Wisconsin Department of Education. In 1953 she left that position to become a full-time UW Medical School faculty member in the Department of Surgery—Ear, Nose and Throat Division. A sabbatical year (1968-1969) was spent at Columbia University, and the following year she traveled with a group of otolaryngologists to Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Budapest. Maxine Bennett retired from the University of Wisconsin in 1978 and was awarded an emerita professorship. Later she was elected president of the Wisconsin Otolaryngology Society, and in 1988, she received the Wisconsin Medical Alumni Association Emeritus Professor Faculty Award. In 1992, she became a member of the State Medical Society Fifty Years club for her fifty years as a doctor.

During her early UW years, otolaryngology was largely taught by part-time volunteer clinical faculty. Maxine particularly enjoyed teaching medical students and received the third-year students “Bedpan Award” for excellence in teaching. She subsequently was successful in developing an approved post-graduate residency training program, and in 1963, she was promoted to professor and chair of Otolaryngology. An active member of the American Academy of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology, she served on the Home Study Faculty and became an examiner for the Otolaryngology Board. In 1967 she became the first woman accepted into the American Laryngological, Rhinological and Otological Society (The Triological)—a prestigious organization for which a peer-reviewed thesis remains a prerequisite for membership. Later she was elected vice-president of the Triological Middle Section and executed a Midwest regional meeting in Madison with a scientific program that included several leading women in otolaryngology.

Maxine Bennett’s career can only be fully appreciated by placing her in a historical context. In a recent interview, she described growing up never having known a woman physician and graduating from a high school where her female classmates generally went on to become “housewives or farmwives” and seldom attended college. Few ever went on to medical school; there were only three other women in Maxine’s medical school class. Women in surgery were scarce—especially in academic centers—and those that succeeded needed an exterior toughness to be accepted by many of their male peers. With her UW appointment, Maxine Bennett became the only woman in the surgery department. Not surprisingly, she was assigned to the surgical nurses’ locker room/lounge facilities. Her office was a shared space with Dr. Betty Bamforth of anesthesiology. Nationally, Maxine Bennett is acknowledged to have been the first female chair of an academic otolaryngology program in the US. As late as 1980, there were only a few other women in prominent academic otolaryngology positions. These women have reported that they stood out at national meetings but grew to know each other and to form a supportive network. Through efforts of such pioneering women, women in otolaryngology increased from less than 1% in 1980 to 6% in 1998 and

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24% by 2005. While working to clear professional hurdles, Maxine maintained a balanced life and developed life-long friendships. She had many interests—including art, travel, hiking, and mountain climbing—that took her from the Sand Hills of Nebraska, to the Colorado Rockies and the Swiss Alps. She was also proud of the house she built on Lake Waubesa with views of the lake and the thoughtfully preserved Indian effigy mounds. As today we enjoy the growth of UW otolaryngology to a position of prominence in research, teaching, and clinical innovation, it is important to look back and appreciate the seminal role of Maxine Bennett. Her impact should also be appreciated by women in surgical fields, especially the current generation of successful women in academic otolaryngology.

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