

Tekla Strom Ylvisaker
March 19, 1928 - March 27, 1988

A biographical sketch of Tekla Strom Ylvisaker can never do justice to the richness of her life and her person. Her warmth and compassion were best captured by a Chippewa Indian quotation, penetratingly simple, which was invoked by a close family friend: "I like myself better when I'm with you." The variety and extent of her activities and her interests were the topic of many admiring articles, one of which was especially descriptive, tracing much of Tekla's vibrancy to her nursing education. The article also identified her active support of nursing scholarships, quoting her statement: "Nursing is a profession which gave me more than I could ever give back."

Tekla Strom was the 11th of 12 children born to Swedish Immigrant parents in the family's home in the tiny Upper Peninsula town of Corinne, Michigan. Her early life was spent in a pioneer-like environment - a large, old false-front homestead converted from a former saloon and loggers' boarding house, without plumbing or electricity, only a wood-burning cook stove and a wood-burning stove for heat.

The family livelihood was dependent on farming, hunting, fishing and trapping. Both parents promulgated basic values of self-sufficiency, self-motivation, industriousness, honesty and, above all, an appreciation for the value of learning. Tekla was possessed of an insatiable curiosity and an unusually retentive mind. The natural surroundings of fields, forests, rocks, minerals and animal life greatly influenced her in her later career as a nurse and in her dominant interests in horticulture, mineralogy and gemology. A township library established by her father in the large family home led to avid reading and especially to a fondness for classic poetry which she memorized extensively and could quote by the page. Lastly, the heritage of her Swedish parents resulted in a deep respect for the influence of Swedish culture on her own life. Eventually, this led to her intensive involvement with international cultural exchange and to an honorary award bestowed by the king of Sweden.

Tekla's scholastic aptitude influenced her high-school principal to encourage her toward further education. Limited finances made this seem a remote possibility until she was made aware of opportunities for a nursing education. Her acceptance into the Henry Ford Hospital School of Nursing and Hygiene became a turning point in her life. This unique school, under the influence of its benefactor, Clara Ford, was not only an excellent training ground in theoretical and clinical nursing, but, in many ways, a finishing school for young women. Tekla took full advantage, expanding her horizons and interests, graduating with honors in 1949. Her early clinical work was in pediatrics followed by more than two years as a surgical nurse.

On New Year's Eve 1951, Tekla married John Ylvisaker, a young general surgeon then in the United States Air Force. Family life took over in 1954 with the birth of their first son, Jon, followed in 19 months by the birth of premature triplets, Susan, Nancy, and Jeffrey. Her nursing skills and instincts, which throughout her life gave her practical insights, organizational efficiency and warm tenderness, were never more apparent.

During her pregnancy she made her own diagnosis of impending multiple births to the somewhat scoffing amusement, then disbelief, of her obstetrician. Possessed of an uncanny degree of extrasensory perception, a characteristic operative throughout her life, she also predicted accurately the exact date of birth of the triplets, which occurred eight weeks prematurely. The care of four infants, three of which were tiny "preemies," was organized with surgical precision. Laughingly, she came to depend on "Dr. Strom's" self-diagnosis and therapies, which were unerringly appropriate, rather than those of her surgeon husband. As her four children grew toward independence, Tekla grew almost exponentially. She became an orchid horticulturist with her own greenhouse and a leading participant in orchid societies. She developed an extensive mineralogical collection. She turned gemology, pursuing academic training with the Gemological Institute of America to become a gemologist certified both in diamonds and colored stones.

Tekla traveled extensively, most especially to the Far East to collect gems. Throughout this personal growth, Tekla steadfastly involved herself with educational organizations and their scholarship programs: the Women's National Farm and Garden Association (president of the local chapter); the Cranbrook Art Academy; the Swedish Council of Detroit (a two-year president); the Swedish Council of America (member of the national board of directors); Oakland University and its Meadow Brook Hall; and the Elizabeth S. Moran nursing scholarship of Henry Ford Hospital.

In all of these activities, Tekla's organizational as well as interpersonal skills, honed by her nursing background, won her leadership roles. More importantly, she won the respect, admiration and affection of a wide spectrum of personages, from the national leaders in industry to project coworkers to fellow professionals, from university presidents to the Swedish royalty. Foremost always, however, was the integrity and beauty of her home, the love of her family and friends and the satisfaction of a life lived in constant daily fulfillment.

Tekla died of multiple myeloma one week following her momentous 60th birthday party attended by her family and her many friends. In her later days, facing the inevitable outcome of her illness, her simple evaluation of her life to a friend was: "my cup runneth over."

The Tekla Strom Ylvisaker Endowed Scholarship for Nursing has been established in memory of Tekla by her husband, Dr. John Ylvisaker, with the desire that many fine young individuals will follow in her footsteps blessed by the attributes and skills of nursing in the service of their patients, communities and loving families.

-----John R. Ylvisaker