

A close-up portrait of Helen Mackman, a woman with blonde hair and blue eyes, wearing a white nurse's uniform. The image is partially obscured by a white text box with a double-line border.

Helen Mackman Governor

I started my nurse training when I was 17 in the 1960s. Between blocks of lectures, you went onto different wards, with a record book that would have to be signed off by each ward sister to prove you'd accomplished set procedures and given high

standards of patient care. As nurses, back then, we were taught to make time to literally sit and listen to patients. The ward sister was often a dragon and she'd monitor what you were doing very carefully so she could keep her patients safe.

My very first ward was a private ward, and my very first patient was a lady in a single room who'd had an operation for cataracts in both eyes. Unlike these days, when you're in and out in a day, you'd have to sit in bed for two weeks with your eyes covered and the room in semi-darkness.

I was given the job of cleaning the patients' teeth - real and false - twice a day. The sink in this lady's room was very old-fashioned, and what I hadn't appreciated in the half light was that the overflow was on the top of it. While I was cleaning the lady's top set of dentures and chatting away to her, the bottom set slipped down the hole



and into the drain. I didn't tell her but just slipped away to see the ward sister. For once, I saw her lip twitch with laughter, and she took over the situation. There were some very long forceps that you used to remove things from the bedpans, and she sterilised a pair of these and tried to get the teeth out with them! In the end the plumbers undid the pipes and got her teeth back - obviously they had to be well and truly scrubbed! Luckily for me, the lady found

it very entertaining, to the extent that when she went home, I had an invitation to go to tea at her home.

Later on in my career, I worked for the Community Health Council, for Macmillan, and now as a governor at this hospital. There was a period, though, when I was a single mother to three children, and a carer to my elderly parents. I couldn't go out much, so I started my own ball dress hire business. I knew absolutely nothing about it, and I don't know what sparked it really! At the time, my son had to design a logo for a CDT project, so I got him to design one

for my business, 'Party Pieces'. I kitted out my spare room as a salon. I went to designer fashion shows with a girlfriend and blagged my way in! I would buy for one season, hire each dress out three or four times each, and have a sale at the end of six months. Each designer had their own models, and if you saw a dress you liked, a model would go and put it on for you. I got to know these models and I asked them to help me raise money for York Against Cancer, persuading someone in a large house to host a fashion show. It just sort of snowballed from there.

I work for Macmillan in this hospital, running



groups for patients living with the effects of cancer. The groups work towards learning to cope with all the difficult emotions that you have because of that particular experience - relationships, nutrition, exercise... none of the participants have met each other before, and it's a mixture of different ages and different stages in treatment, but they always gel and start to

feel secure with each other. There's a lot of storytelling involved - people want to share how things are for them along with anecdotes from their family.

I've been involved in an oral history project in my village - Poppleton - a village with people who've been there for ever as well as incomers. In 2000, we wanted to capture our village's history by interviewing the older people particularly. I was involved in a lot of the interviewing and transcribing. Some of them have died since then - so it is wonderful to have the CD-ROM of their voices telling their stories.

