



## **Sharon Presley: An Oral History**

**50 Year Career – Courier, Mail Center,  
Project Search and Step-Up Mentor**

at Hennepin County Medical Center

HENNEPIN MEDICAL HISTORY CENTER

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HCMC ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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Interviewed by Mary Ellen Bennett, RN

October 4, 2023

At Hennepin County Medical Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Edited and redacted by Mary Ellen Bennett and Michele Hagen

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Mary Ellen Bennett: The following interview was conducted with Sharon Presley on behalf of the Hennepin Medical History Center for the History Center's oral history project. It took place on October 4th, 2023, at Hennepin Healthcare. The interviewer is Mary Ellen Bennett. We are excited to have you here today, Sharon, to tell us the story of your career at Hennepin County Medical Center. You have been an employee for fifty years and you have seen so many changes over the years. Sharon, can you tell us a little bit about your personal history, where you grew up and where you went to school?

Sharon Presley: I started out at Grant School. Grant School went all the way to sixth grade, and it was an important side of the neighborhood. We were, I'll say, a mixed community, so I've always had a mixed population. I love my old neighborhood. It had Jewish stores and Caucasian stores, and we had a few places we could go, like to the library. We could walk to the library, the Sumner Field Library. And we had a park about a block away that we could go to, to ice skate in the wintertime. And we lived on a hilly side of town, where we could slide down on some cardboard, because we didn't have sleds, in the wintertime. And it was just good, clean fun back then. You could use somebody's vacant lot to play kickball and we liked that.

And sometimes we tried to play football with the big brothers. I didn't have a big brother, but my girlfriends had big brothers and they like playing football with us girls. We had a lot of girls in the neighborhood, more than your average neighborhood, I think. But we loved just being with each other. On Saturdays we will go to the library and people would see us walking down the streets and say, 'are you all related?' And we say 'yeah!'

We didn't have a lot of vehicles to ride in so we did a lot of walking, and we always walked to school. And the only time we got on a bus was to go to a concert downtown or something like that, something the school might have done once a year. Or like when you got to sixth grade, you go to the patrol picnic. You got to do the rides and stuff like that. So, we had good teachers, and some students became principals. There were some very smart kids in my neighborhood. And some of them became head nurses, and I think somebody became a doctor.

In junior high, I went to Lincoln and that's where our pool was and where we were supposed to learn how to swim. I was really glad that we had a pool here at the hospital, a warm one too. We didn't have a pool at North High where I went to high school. But I learned how to root my team on, but they didn't win that much. They had more variety back then, they had the ski team, and they had the swimming, they have the people that could do the acrobats and stuff like that. They were very good, and I thought they were number one in my book from when I could see them. I used to be more athletic when I was younger, do the track, I'd be on the track team. And even in summer school, my father encouraged us to go to summer school whether we needed it or not, and it didn't last that long. By the time you got back home, the kids were doing the same old thing.

My father taught me how to go and catch the buses over south. And so, I took drama and typing over there, when I was younger. We used to have a popcorn shop over north and I moved to that neighborhood, and it was the best. But I loved my neighborhood. It had variety and it had good bakeries. And the bakeries would ship their rolls and stuff to the neighborhood stores, and I miss all that. We used to have delis and we used to have drug stores and McDonald's and shoe stores and besides different grocery stores.

The Farmer's Market was the big thing as I got older, downtown [Nicollet Mall]. And that's a fun time of the summers [at lunch hour] to go down there and get something fresh. And people just congregated, and I haven't been there for a long time now, so I don't know if they have it or not. It's just we don't do that walking anymore and it's not homey like it used to be. Where people from work would just walk down there [Nicollet Mall] and come right back. And you see what people had and you said 'Oh, where'd you get that from' and they tell you. So, it's a lot of conversation on Thursdays and some Fridays. I would really reward myself if I walked, by getting a little flower or something from Bachman's, because I was trying to lose weight. I was always trying to lose a little bit. But I guess it would go down if I did exercise a little more. And that's what the doctor had asked me to do, 20 minutes more of some activity and so that was my activity.

Me and a co-worker, we used to go to exercise classes over at the church across the street, at noon. And we will walk over there and do the exercise and then come back. And there's other little things you could do to exercise, like walk around the block because we were encouraged, I forget what you call it, Employee Health and Wellness. It would seem like once a year encourage the employees to do some steps, some kind of way.

Bennett: What led you to choose Hennepin County Medical Center for your employer?

Presley: They had a job opening. That was it. And I look for the county, or the state, or the government for a job because they have benefits. I did do some other jobs other than that, but I knew that you would get some benefits from them. So, if it had been the Government Center [Hennepin County Government Center], I would have gone to the Government Center. But at the time I needed it, it was the hospital. So, I tried the hospital.

Bennett: Good. Well, we're glad you chose us. So, you then worked in a job called the Courier Service?

Presley: Well, it was called ADA-BEC.<sup>1</sup>

Bennett: ADA-BEC. ADA-BEC Courier? ADA-BEC Runner?

Presley: No, it was a Runner.

Bennett: You were always very busy in this position. And you told me that one day you clocked 12 miles in about 6 hours on one shift when you measured it.

Presley: It was the second shift. There were two people on this shift. First shift had four people. The third shift had one person. And so, you wore a beeper, and you got paged overhead. And those were the two main ways of them communicating with you. When your beeper went off, you had to answer it. We did have a phone in the office, too. But we weren't in the office that much. Most of our runs started with Medical Records and now it's called HIM [Health Information Management]. It's had about two or three different names since I started here. And so, you take the medical records, usually to the ER [Emergency Room]. There are two or three stops in the ER. They had the STAB [Stabilization] room and they had the Emergency Room. Also, we picked up labs and sometimes you picked up labs in both places. And you would have to deliver those right away because a lot of them were emergencies.

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<sup>1</sup> ADA-BEC – was a system in the hospital that was intended to transport materials like charts and laboratory specimens to and from the patient care areas. It did not function as intended.

We had emergency labs and we had routine labs, but we delivered them all at once. It's just that you could take your time for the routine ones. But the emergency ones, I would try to run because sometimes it's a car accident, a heart attack, or a shooting. It could be any kind of emergency you can imagine. And if it was you in there, you would want your stuff delivered and processed as fast as possible, and so that's what I would take very seriously. And then there were other places we had to go; it wasn't just that place. We might have to go to, they had Peds Clinic, they had the Dentistry Clinic, they had the Medicine Clinic. All those clinics we serviced. We had the Surgery Clinic, we had the Occupational Therapy Clinic, so all these places had charts. And there was the Burn Unit and there was everything that's there today. They would call us, or we would have regular pickups for our mail. And sometimes they would leave it; they had little place or trays in the hallway. That was our mail station.

Bennett: The ADA-BEC station.

Presley: Yes. And so, we would go by there and see what was there and process it. Leave them something or pick up something and deliver it. That's what we did, and some were those big jugs like pickle jar jugs. Three or four of them.

Bennett: What was in them?

Presley: Urine. They were full.<sup>2</sup>

Bennett: Those must have been pretty heavy.

Presley: Oh, they were, but I used my cart for that. The bottom of the cart because there's no way I could put them in the little blue bucket that we carried.

And also, we had to write down our runs. Wherever we picked up, we had to put the time down, that we picked it up and the time we delivered it. It wasn't like it was just pick up and run, you had to write it down. So, it helped you remember where you're supposed to go to, even though you might remember it, and then who knows, you might forget it. Just because you might be trying to juggle more than one thing at the same time.

Bennett: I think the ADA-BEC system was supposed to be an automated system that went through the hospital to deliver charts and labs and those types of things. But it never worked.

Presley: That's how I got my job. My job was only supposed to last six months, and either I had to find another job or that was it. So, what happened was they decided to keep our last crew.

Bennett: Sometimes the charts were very plentiful, right? Sometimes people had many charts.

Presley: Some had a few pieces of paper, but others, like the renal patients, had up to twelve or fifteen charts because they would be in need, and I really felt for those people. They didn't always give us all of them [charts]. They might get the first and the last, or three of them. But if they wanted all of them, we had to deliver all of them. And so, we had to use the cart then. We had our own file system too at the top. We had folders that drop in so we could sort our mail. We used the bottom of the cart a lot for the charts if we had a whole bunch. But otherwise, your arms were full.

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<sup>2</sup> Urine was collected in large jugs for laboratory testing of creatinine clearance in patients with renal issues.

Bennett: Did you also deliver X-ray films?

Presley: Yes, and those were giant back then. They were really big and heavy. Awkward.

Bennett: Were they kind of slippery sometimes?

Presley: Well, they had jackets. Most of them. They should have jackets. I'm not going to say everybody was correct in the way they would put things out, like even today they don't always put the medical records in their proper envelopes. But we try to do the best we can.

Bennett: How did your work change over the years with the implementation of new technologies like the tube system and the electronic medical record?

Presley: Well, the tube system, I think, has helped the people that need it. They had to fix it a lot. They used to have these lockers in the basement to deliver laundry and food trays. They were kind of clumsy, but they were good. But when they messed up, they just messed up. That just helped us stay employed. And eventually, they changed our job, so we didn't have to make all those deliveries for the Chart Room. The Chart Room was responsible for their own charts after a while. And the lab people were, I guess, responsible or the ER, they were responsible to take their labs to the lab.

And so, we mainly worked in the mailroom. When my job changed, I went to day shift, and so on my day shift job, I did more sorting. Because at night, I didn't do that much sorting. I just did a little sorting of what I picked up around on my run. But in the daytime, you get all these deliveries from the outside that the hospital gets. Like you get labs. These labs are packaged up, whereas the other ones weren't packaged stuff that we picked up from the clinics and the ER. Now we just call the lab to come and get their mail after we pack it and put it in buckets. So usually, we don't have to pick up labs anymore, except what we get shipped into the Mail Room. And the X-rays that we get are on disk now, mainly. They're not those big, clumsy ones. The only long ones we get mainly are for dentistry. In dentistry, they don't get that many like they used to. Maybe it's on disc? I don't know.

Bennett: Everything is going digital. So that makes it a lot easier for people to access them and then you don't have to be carrying them around either.

Can you describe how your work changed when the new clinic building opened up across the street?

Presley: We had to learn new places to go. For a while, we didn't have to go over there. Eventually I got a new supervisor and I had to go over there. He added more things to do like packages from the dock. So, it looks like it's easy, but it's not easy.

Bennett: No, I can imagine that it's quite a challenge, especially with the new building. You told me that your supervisor made maps and color-coded some of the stops and so that helped a lot.

Presley: Blair Cleaver, he was really good. They're color-coded and 3D. That's the word I wanted to say. They were 3D. And he did such a good job. And then with the shelves in the mailroom, we had new shelves, he labeled all those and made a little map of each section because we have the orange section, the red section, the purple section, the green section. Then we have an area for the outside clinics, because we have couriers come in for those. We don't have to go outside the hospital normally to deliver something.

Bennett: That's how it evolved too. When we started having those outside clinics and we had to have couriers bringing things back and forth from the outside clinics.

Presley: And the government center.

Bennett: And the government center too.

Presley: So, we get mail stamped a lot. We hire them [Government Center Mail Room] to stamp our mail. We only have a small [stamp] machine now. We used to have three machines and we used to stamp everything, and we had to try and get it out every day. And people would bring stuff when it's time to close, to get it out, like it's real important. And they try to put that pressure on you to get it out and you have to run all the way down to, you know, where that other restaurant is in the basement.

Bennett: Mayta's over here?

Presley: Yes, way over there, past that. And they've got some mailboxes over there. The mailman picks up kind of late over there. So, we tried running over there to get it out. We don't do that anymore. That's out. We send it out twice a day. Once in the morning and at 1:00 in the afternoon. When the government center comes over, they take it over to the Post Office, so we don't have to do that rush stuff anymore. And we used to have FedEx come, and now FedEx comes to the Dock, but they don't have their outside box anymore. They let them go. And now we have UPS. We used to have both for a while, but I guess UPS is cheaper and somebody thought they would save money.

Bennett: You are involved in a couple great programs called Project Search and Step up. Can you tell us about these programs and how HCMC is involved and what your role is?

Presley: Well Project Search started when I asked for some volunteers because I needed help, and I was trying to wrack my little brain on how I'm going to get some help. I had to take the initiative to hustle and try to get something going. So, I learned about, really it was the Step-Up program first. And the Volunteer Office helped me with that. And I only got one or two students. We went to the University [of Minnesota] for orientation. And I just told my boss, I said, 'I'm going for this orientation to get us some help in the Mail Room,' and they didn't deny me or anything.

I went and came back. I did it at least two years. The third year I didn't do it. They [the students] were interested in getting jobs at the hospital or going into the medical field. So, these students got paid. That's the difference. They only could do fifteen hours a week, twenty and the most, I believe. They were very good. Most of them did their job the way they should. Project Search, they got credit, like school credit. Or they got credit for finishing their program. And they were a little bit older than the other ones. And we would start with maybe at least two, sometimes three students. And the other departments like HR [Human Resources], EVS [Environmental Services], and the kitchen were the main other people that took them. And also, I think the Volunteer Department might have taken some of the students too. But I think about the same this year, except HR I don't think has taken any this year. But some people in HR are interested in getting a student. But I don't know, but because of COVID everything dwindled. Some of the same people aren't working here anymore, so some of those connections are gone. And I hope we get someone that's interested in helping with that program.

Bennett: You said you train them, and you try to meet where they are at, as far as their training and what you have them doing. Can you talk a little bit about that.

Presley: Well, every person is different. Even if it was you. I don't know if you need glasses or if you can hear, or if you're shy, or if you have a medical problem. You find these things out as you go on. And like the other day, I found out one guy was gluten free. So, he couldn't have the treat that we got during our Distribution Week. So, I know not to offer him any cookies anymore. If it is, it has to be gluten free. You find out different things as you go along. Like some things the teachers don't know. They have a teacher too that is with them most days. Some of the students are very astute and some want to know more. Some asked to be in the mailroom, and some asked to be somewhere else, like the kitchen. Or they know they want to work with food. But we at least have some kind of experience for them. They can sort if they want to, they can deliver. I asked them to call some people and tell them their mail is ready and they can come and get it, stuff like that. They learn how to communicate and I want them to learn customer service. I figure they might have customer service anywhere they go. I try to make it clear that you treat people the way you want to be treated. And don't rush in the elevator, let the patients go first. Stuff like that. Just common-sense stuff. And they usually are very thankful later on.

Bennett: Sounds like you're teaching them how to work, how to survive in a workplace, and the proper etiquette. That's great. How old are the people who are in these programs.

Presley: I think the limit is twenty-two years. The one from the university I think is sixteen.

Bennett: Well, I think that's something to be very proud of, that you are doing and also the hospital should be proud. It's an important project and we're getting benefit but also the workers are getting benefit and experience by coming here and having you as a mentor.

Presley: That's what I call real community. And that's supposed to be our goal, is to be a community. And I believe that it does take a village for our young. I know when I was younger, I had experience going to court. Like being a court aide. And so, I got mentored there. And my father was a policeman. He had taken me to court too, but I didn't grow in that field. But at least I got the experience and I know what it is to get experience in different places. And so, I always tell my students that they can come to me, with anything. And I mean it. I don't like for people to say, 'how are you doing' and they don't really want to know. I figure if you ask the question, you want to know and help in any way possible.

Bennett: That's really wonderful. Can you tell us why you like HCMC and why you like your coworkers? From some of the conversations we've had, it sounds like you've had a good career here and good coworkers.

Presley: My coworkers, they have their experiences, and they share them. And that's one thing I like. Like when I first started working here. We knew what was going on the night before. When you came in the building, you were greeted, say, with Housekeeping. Housekeeping knew what happened the night before. And so, then you knew some of the spots that were busy. And so, we have always been very busy in this hospital. They always had the residents, and they always had their rounds. And they had overhead announcements. That's what I kind of miss a little bit. You have less announcements of what's going on, but they have the emergency announcements still. It's not quite as noisy as it used to be, it's more quiet. But we have our moments in our Mailroom. Sometimes we have people come and come and come and come and then you have it quiet, quiet, quiet. And people say, 'it's quiet in here.' I said, 'well you should have been here a few minutes ago.' So, it's not always the same. I tell people every day is different. You learn different things from different people because you see different people



all the time coming in the Mailroom. And one other thing I liked about my job; I could go into other departments. I didn't have to stay there, I could leave. So, you don't get bored, you know what I'm saying? Because when I used to work for the welfare department, I would get bored. We would have kind of the same routine every day and I think that's why I left. But there was some more action at the Medical Center.

Bennett: Yes, lots of action here. There's never a dull day here. And to get to be all over the hospital and meet lots of different people, that must have been fun too.

Presley: Yes.

Bennett: I feel that maybe what you were saying too is that we all have a mission. The mission for the hospital is the same.

Presley: Just like when they call a code for a missing child. Everybody knows their role. Step out in the hallway and see what's going on and make that call if you see what they're talking about.

Bennett: Yes.

You have had a wonderful and long career at HCMC and have contributed to the success of the hospital and to the care of the patients. Everybody here appreciates your department and the promptness of the mail getting delivered and the packages and all the things in the past too. I was a staff nurse, and it was nice to be able to have the charts delivered and the labs picked up and it really made the world go round here at the hospital. So, on behalf of Hennepin Medical History Center, I want to thank you for the years spent at Hennepin, your dedication to the system running every day is very much appreciated.

Presley: Thank you. Now, every day wasn't rosy now. Some things get lost, and people are upset, you know. And some people send packages to patients that didn't get there right away. Or it gets sent to a different hospital instead of us. We used to call and double check. Even a few weeks ago that happened and I ended up sending it to Children's down the street, it wasn't that far away. The lady called back and thanked me. But we try our best to deliver because some things are very important to people.

Bennett: We couldn't exist and function without your positions and your department.