BRENDA MCCLELLAN-TILSON, NP
As told to Jane Kennedy

Brenda McClellan-Tilson is distinguished by her lifelong, tireless commitment to the reproductive health and well-being of people in her community. In her senior year of high school, her guidance counselor suggested that she try nursing after reviewing her academic achievement and interests. However random her entry was into nursing, Brenda embraced it completely once she started. Her undergraduate degree was a Bachelor of Science degree in nursing with Spanish language emphasis at University of WI-Oshkosh.

Brenda's journey in the women's health arena started in 1980 when her first job as a nurse was at a Planned Parenthood (PP) clinic in northeastern Wisconsin. Within two years, she attended a nurse practitioner training program that was funded by the federal government. The purpose of the program was to increase access to reproductive health services in underserved areas through the creation of mid-level clinician roles (NP). She later achieved a master's degree in nursing as a community health nurse specialist at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Over time, she worked at PP clinics in Milwaukee and all over the state. And, in 1996, she moved to central Wisconsin to work as the nurse practitioner at the Marshfield PP clinic. That clinic was closed due to funding cuts and she transitioned to the Wisconsin Rapids PP location. She was employed by PP for more than 25 years between 1980 and 2020, when she chose to retire from the agency and completed her work at the Wisconsin Rapids PP clinic. She stated, "I tried a few jobs in other types of nursing but always found myself coming back to the agency where I started my nursing career. I cannot say if this was "supposed" to be my life's work or if I just landed on this path. But, once I arrived, it became a mission to which I was and still am fully committed."

Brenda's career has not always felt safe at PP, even when she relocated her family from Milwaukee to Marshfield in 1996. In central Wisconsin, she and her family experienced incidents of harassment through letters and anonymous phone calls that came to her home. Upon arrival at the clinic, she would have to scan the parking lot to look for cars with people sitting in them or an unusual package or damage to the front door of the clinic. Brenda told me, "I have often thought to myself that there aren't too many jobs where a healthcare provider faces such a risk to their lives and the lives of their family just to do their job. But this is the kind of craziness that surrounds my employment as a nurse practitioner at a PP clinic in rural Wisconsin." Her vigilance continued upon entering the clinic; having to check the fax machine for security updates regarding anti- abortion extremists. Most Mondays a local religious group protested outside the Wisconsin Rapids PP clinic and occasionally the police would need to be called to relocate the protesters. Brenda stated, "We were doing our best to prevent unplanned pregnancy and decrease the number of abortions, but that aspect of our services was often overlooked." Yet, amidst many threats and growing political conflicts, Brenda's commitment to address reproductive health issues never wavered. Even in retirement, she continues to support reproductive choice as a volunteer member of Freedom Fund, a local non-profit organization that offers financial assistance to residents of central and northern Wisconsin in their right to reproductive choice.



Brenda McClellan-Tilson

In her clinician role, she encountered people in a wide range of ages with varying health care needs. Brenda says, "Every day I bore witness to so many stories shared with me behind the closed doors of the exam rooms. These were glimpses of real lives that touched my heart in their depths of privacy, fear, suffering, sadness and joy. So much struggling to find one's way in life. Sexuality and personal growth are wrapped up with so many emotions that are part of the human life experience. And they affect everyone to one degree or another." Brenda's career involved not only treating a wide variety of health conditions but also providing a

great deal of education and support. In 2005, she completed special training as a sexual assault nurse examiner (SANE). This involved the documentation of injuries and the collection of forensic evidence for patients being evaluated for sexual assault in the emergency room at St. Joseph's Hospital in Marshfield. For several years she was the coordinator of that program and served as one of the SANEs. During this time, Brenda was employed as a part-time staff nurse in the Birth Center at St. Joseph's Hospital, providing care to postpartum moms and their newborns. This was also a time when Brenda was employed as a clinical instructor for UW- Eau Claire School of Nursing. She worked with nursing students in their clinical nursing education in both institutions and community areas.

Brenda once told me that when she weighed whether to undertake an activity, she asked herself two questions: Does it nurture life? And/or does it create beauty? Certainly, her nursing career involved a lot of nurturing as well as her ongoing time as a hospice volunteer. She also participated in a medical mission to Honduras in 2002. Over the years, her volunteer work has included many activities that have benefited the community such as Hospice Volunteer, Marshfield Cultural Fair volunteer, Mainstreet Marshfield Budding Gardeners, Habitat for Humanity, and National Youth Service Day. Brenda and her husband enjoy gardening together and have had their yard on the Garden Tour to benefit Marshfield Area Respite Care. She has also had perennial and jam sales to raise money for local community service organizations each summer like the Personal Development Center. Her hands are often busy with knitting/crocheting projects that she donates to local fund-raisers and silent auctions. She was part of the group of fiber artists that "yarn-bombed" downtown Marshfield and adorned the turtle at Marshfield Chamber of Commerce with various seasonal costumes. The following is an expression of Brenda's values: "I look forward to a future where all of our citizens have the fulfillment of their basic needs of food, shelter and safety; where everyone in this country has access to the health care services that they need; where all of us experience equality in our life experience and where we embrace our diversity as a gift rather than an obstacle to overcome."