

Claire M. Fagin, Powerful Advocate for Nurses and Nursing, Dies at 97

“It is really hard,” a colleague said, “to identify anyone who has had a larger impact on nursing than Claire.”



Claire M. Fagin in 1993, shortly after being named interim president of the University of Pennsylvania. She had been dean of the university’s nursing school since 1977. Credit...Bill Cramer/Wonderful Machine

By [Cornelia Dean](#)

Jan. 17, 2024

Claire M. Fagin, a leading expert on, advocate for and change agent in the profession of nursing, and one of the first women to lead an Ivy League university, the University of Pennsylvania, died on Tuesday at her home in Manhattan. She was 97.

Her death was confirmed by her son and only immediate survivor, Charles.

Among other achievements, Dr. Fagin was widely credited with overturning the common practice of strictly limiting parental visits to hospitalized children. She was inspired (and infuriated) by what happened in the early 1960s when she and her husband were visiting their young son Joshua, hospitalized for hernia surgery: They were ordered out of the hospital.

So when she earned her doctorate in nursing from New York University in 1964, she made the practice of limiting visits the subject of her dissertation research. Her findings that the practice was harmful drew wide attention — she was interviewed on television about it — and they ignited a transformation in medical care.

“She was the one who cracked that,” said Linda H. Aiken, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing, where Dr. Fagin was named dean in 1977.

Dr. Fagin transformed the school — tripling its enrollment, establishing a doctoral program in nursing and building Penn into a widely acknowledged world leader in nursing research and education. In 2006, Penn renamed its Nursing Education Building the Claire M. Fagin Nursing Sciences Building.

“It is really hard to identify anyone who has had a larger impact on nursing than Claire,” Dr. Aiken said.

In 1993, when Penn’s president, [Sheldon Hackney](#), left to become chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Dr. Fagin replaced him as interim president, a post she held until 1994. (She is often credited as the first woman to serve as president of an Ivy League university, although [Hanna Holborn Gray](#) was acting president of Yale from May 1977 to June 1978.)

Dr. Fagin was later the founding director of the John A. Hartford Foundation’s national program on geriatric nursing. She was also chairwoman of the advisory board that turned a \$100 million grant from the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation into the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at the University of California, Davis, which focuses on master’s and doctoral programs in nursing.



Dr. Fagin in 2006, the year Penn renamed its Nursing Education Building the Claire M. Fagin Nursing Sciences Building. Credit...Mega Paetzhold

All the while, she worked to win nurses the professional respect she felt they did not always receive and the autonomy they needed to work in new ways — for example, as nurse practitioners or researchers. She also advocated for baccalaureate programs for the training of registered nurses, as opposed to the once-common two-year hospital-based or associate degree training programs.

In an interview for this obituary in 2003, Dr. Fagin said, “It is bad for nursing when you cannot differentiate professional nurses from people who go to school for two years.” (According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, a bachelor’s degree is now the “typical” entry-level requirement for registered nurses.)

Before joining Penn, Dr. Fagin was chairwoman of the nursing department at Lehman College of the City University of New York and director of its Health Professions Institute, as well as director of graduate programs in psychiatric nursing in the division of nurse education at New York University. When the National Institute of Mental Health established a clinical research facility in 1953, she was its first director of children’s programs. She was a member of the National Academy of Medicine.

Claire Muriel Mintzer was born in Manhattan on Nov. 25, 1926, to Harry Mintzer, an immigrant from Russia, and Mae (Slatin) Mintzer, who was from Poland. She grew up in the University Heights section of the Bronx, where her parents had a grocery store.

She entered Hunter College at 16; over the objections of her parents, who hoped she would emulate an aunt and become a physician, she enrolled after one semester in Wagner College on Staten Island, which she chose because it had just established a bachelor’s degree program in nursing.

Her parents opposed her decision, until her aunt pointed out that she could always enroll in medical school after she earned her degree.

But medical school was not something she wanted, she said in the interview. She was inspired instead, she said, by the idea of wartime nursing service. And, she added, not entirely jokingly, she admired the glamorous blue capes, lined with red, worn by members of the Army Nurse Corps.

By the time she earned her nursing degree, in 1948, she had already begun working at Seaview Hospital on Staten Island, which was then a tuberculosis hospital. Her work with children there grew into a lifelong interest in the psychiatric problems of children, and in psychiatric nursing in general. From there she went to Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan, where she worked with emotionally disturbed adolescents.

Image



In 1948, when she was known as Claire Mintzer, Dr. Fagin, second row, second from left, received a nursing degree from Wagner College on Staten Island. Credit...Wagner College

After earning a master's degree in psychiatric nursing at Columbia University in 1951, Dr. Fagin joined the pediatric psychiatry staff at the Clinical Center at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md.

While she was working there, she met Samuel L. Fagin, a mathematician and electrical engineer, and they married in 1952. [He died](#) in 2019 at 96. Their son [Joshua died](#) of Covid in 2020 at 62.

Well into her 90s, Dr. Fagin continued to write and speak about the importance of the nursing profession, as well as its problems and how to address them. In 2022, when there was widespread concern about the Covid-related burnout of health care workers, particularly hospital nurses, she and Dr. Aiken published an analysis in STAT, an online journal covering health, science and medicine, suggesting that the real cause of burnout was inadequate hospital staffing, which they said Medicare could fix by raising existing hospital staffing requirements.

At Dr. Fagin's death, she and Dr. Aiken were at work on better ways to encourage nurses, physicians and other health care workers to speak as one on matters of public health.

Nursing is "a renaissance calling," Dr. Fagin maintained. "Healing is an art. You are using a science to perform an art."

In spite of her advanced degrees, her prominent academic positions and honorary degrees and other awards, Dr. Fagin always made a point of identifying herself as a nurse — a practice, she recalled, that did not sit well with her mother. Citing her other

qualifications and the jobs she held, her mother would say that her daughter was not, as she put it, “a real nurse.”

“I would say, ‘Mama, I’m an R.N.’” Dr. Fagin said. “That’s what it means — Real Nurse.”