

Jane Claflin: A Portrait

The brush strokes merge whimsically on the canvas to form the image of a woman. She stands erect, proper in a backdrop of magenta. Her tidy navy blue skirt, tailored white blouse and colorful scarf speak of refinement, substance. Her hair is styled, neatly swept up on one side. Her modestly folded hands hold a pair of eyeglasses.

“I never thought of myself as a beautiful woman,” says Jane Claflin, critically studying the framed representation. “So I told all those nice people who wanted to name a room for me that if there had to be a portrait, it needed to be impressionistic. It’s fine, really. I don’t think it looks much like me, but I think it stands like me – at least when I remember to hold my shoulders back.”

The Claflin Library in the MGH’s historic Bulfinch Building is a fitting home for the portrait. It is also fitting that this elegant room carries the moniker of an extraordinary hospital benefactor and dedicated volunteer leader. For more than 40 years, Jane Claflin has strengthened and supported, tended and touched the Massachusetts General Hospital. Her fingerprints are everywhere.

She has served as trustee, fund-raiser, friend and cheerleader. She is the force behind programs that support women in their professional careers. She is a major reason the MGH opened a backup child care center. She is responsible for millions of dollars in charitable gifts for hospital facilities, people and programs. She has been a fierce advocate for nursing. The list of committees that have benefited from her advice, wisdom and perspective is staggering.

And while few dare challenge her judgment, people from every department, every corner of the MGH would eagerly agree that Mrs. R. Morton Claflin is indeed a beautiful woman.

As she walks the hospital, busy physicians and nurses stop to chat. People in scrubs, pink coats, uniforms and badges smile and wave at her, many offer hugs that are warmly returned. She shares jokes and stories with them. She listens, engages and is genuinely interested. She asks about their families, colleagues and milestones. Mrs. Claflin clearly has spent a great deal of time getting to know people.

The MGH met Jane Claflin in the late 1950s, soon after she and her husband, Morton, and their two sons moved to Boston. She had volunteered at hospitals since graduating from Sophie Newcomb College in New Orleans, and once in Boston she was drawn to the MGH. Her husband’s aunt encouraged her to join the Ladies Visiting Committee. Within a few years, she was elected chairman of that organization.

In this role, Mrs. Claflin was invited to the weekly department heads meeting, which in the 1960s involved fewer than 20 people. In these meetings, she learned about

the hospital and proved to be a quick study about its needs and goals, strengths and weaknesses. “These department leaders became my friends. They accepted me as their colleague. They trusted me and they talked with me,” she says. By then, Mrs. Claflin was spending a lot of time in the hospital, attending meetings, visiting patients, walking the halls, learning.

In 1973, Massachusetts Governor Francis Sargent appointed Jane Claflin to the MGH Board of Trustees, the first woman to hold a seat at the table. “I always have felt that they put me on the board for two reasons: First, they knew that it was time – past time, really – for the MGH have a woman trustee; and second, they didn’t think I would rock the boat.”

During her tenure as a trustee from 1973 through 1989, Mrs. Claflin says she never did rock the boat and never acted confrontational or difficult. Instead she found other ways to be effective. She worked behind the scenes, learning firsthand about issues from employees and staff – her friends in the trenches. But she has been tough, even relentless, on issues that are near and dear to her. She acknowledges that her prominent, often disarming Mississippi drawl has provided a gentle mask for her powerful will and dogged determination. More than once she has been called “the iron fist in the velvet glove.” She laughs at this description. “If it’s true, then I certainly hope that people think there’s more velvet than iron.”

This blend of graciousness and resolve has proved enormously effective in her years of fund raising on behalf of the MGH. “Back in the late 1970s, the hospital needed a trustee to help with philanthropy,” she says, “and I was the only one willing.” When she accepted the challenge, she knew nothing about fund raising, but she says she understood the importance of charitable gifts to the MGH because she saw the need every day.

As co-chair of the Campaign to Rebuild the MGH, Mrs. Claflin helped raise \$175 million during the eight-year program, which concluded successfully in 1990. By then, she had retired as a trustee, assuming the role of honorary trustee in 1989. In 1992, active as ever, she volunteered to serve as co-chair of the hospital’s Leadership Campaign, a five-year effort to raise \$160 million in support of hospital programs and facilities. The hospital met that goal a year ahead of schedule, but instead of ending it in 1996, Mrs. Claflin advocated for doubling the goal and extending the campaign to December 2000.

Mrs. Claflin stepped down from her official philanthropy leadership role in March 2002, but she acknowledges that she will never completely step out of fund raising. Her calendar is still full of luncheons, meetings and special events to plan strategies, promote programs and thank donors for their support. And she has planted many seeds that will continue to grow into vital gifts for the hospital in the years to come.

Another passion for Mrs. Claflin has been ensuring that the MGH is a welcoming, comfortable, friendly and supportive place for women – for those who need health care as well as those who are pursuing careers in medicine. In 1993, she helped create the

Women in Academic Medicine Committee, serving as its chair. Her work led to the formation in 1997 of the Office for Women's Careers to support, recruit and retain women faculty members. Also through the committee, Mrs. Claflin focused attention on the difficulty women had in sustaining research productivity during their child-rearing years, which too often limited career advancement. The MGH's Executive Committee on Research responded to the call by establishing funding for junior women faculty to help them through this critical period. The awards were named the Claflin Distinguished Scholar Awards in honor of their greatest champion.

Mrs. Claflin also recognized the difficulties faced by working families when child care arrangements broke down. She was among a small group of individuals who accepted the challenge and planned and opened a facility to provide emergency child care for staff, employees and patients. The MGH Backup Child Care Center was among the first of its kind in a hospital.

While the MGH has absorbed much of Mrs. Claflin's focus, she has managed to carve out time for other activities as well. She has served as director of the Massachusetts Division of the American Cancer Society, been a member of the Harvard Medical School Admissions Committee and chaired the trustees of the Worcester Foundation for Experimental Biology. She also has served the Executive Office of the President of the United States as a member of the Health Services Industry Committee and the Federal Department of Health and Human Services as a member of the National Advisory Council for the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. No woman had ever served on the vestry of Boston's Trinity Church until 1971 when Jane Claflin was chosen for that position.

She is also a devoted wife, mother and grandmother.

"I certainly have been given a lot of credit for doing things at the MGH, but I have never done anything alone," she says. "There has always been such a marvelous group of dedicated people with whom I've had the good fortune to work through the years. This hospital has given me so much more than I could ever possibly give it."

Most would disagree. For more than 40 years, Jane Claflin – shoulders back – has stood arm-in-arm with the MGH. She has poured her heart and her love into her hospital. In so many ways, Massachusetts General Hospital is a vastly richer place because of the unwavering loyalty and indomitable spirit of this dedicated volunteer, this tireless crusader – this truly beautiful woman.