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Our Valhalla: Thirty-Eight Years of the 'New' NYMC

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Just before 9:00a.m., first and second year medical students migrate from their on-campus apartments to class. Some sneak into the cafeteria to grab a bagel or coffee. Others were in the library the whole time, pre-studying under the glow of skylights. Along the way, the students pass snippets of history that line the walls: paintings of founders and deans long gone, sketches of an old “homeopathic medical college” perched above a grocery store, the silvery names of honored graduates, and of course photographs of Flower Hospital – the very first built by a medical school in the United States. Arriving just a little late via the commuter lot, I pass under the Tree of Hippocrates – planted at Flower & Fifth Avenue Hospital in 1972 and then transplanted to Valhalla in 1979. I stop under the tree, which now towers over the rear entrance of the Basic Sciences Building, and consider – this Valhalla campus must have a history, as of yet untold. Indeed, the journey of New York Medical College is a testament to perseverance through difficult times, doing the best with what you have, and never giving up on doing better...

Our Valhalla: Thirty-Eight Years of the ‘New’ NYMC

Gavin Stern

The basic sciences building was completed in 1972, intended as temporary quarters for New York Medical College. At that time, the College operated two campuses (and trained two medical school classes) while departments slowly transferred from Manhattan to Valhalla. Early students at the Valhalla campus would complete their training a year ahead of their Manhattan counterparts, as the “B” classes of 1975 and 1976 operated under an experimental three-year curriculum. Lectures, labs, and study modules were all located in the Basic Sciences Building – students and faculty alike crammed into clusters of rooms separated by “inter-labs.” Most students actually hailed from New York. In their yearbook tribute, the Class of 1975B “Pioneers” described the rigors of the transition period: unpaved roads, mountains of mud, a lack of furnishings, off-site faculty, a difficult housing situation, and one extraordinarily leaky roof. The modern Medical Education Center was only a dream.

One cannot discuss the history of the Valhalla campus without explaining the circumstances surrounding the closure of Flower & Fifth Avenue Hospital. The move to Westchester occurred during a period of financial turmoil in New York City, as massive cuts in reimbursement threatened the survival of many hospitals and medical schools in the 1970’s. Flower & Fifth Avenue Hospital and its owner, New York Medical College, were struck particularly hard. Seeking financial stability, New York Medical College signed an affiliation agreement with Pace College

(now Pace University) in 1973, nearly merged with Metropolitan Hospital in 1977, and even considered a move to Queens. Ultimately, NYMC would affiliate with the Archdiocese of New York, at that time a major provider of healthcare in New York City. The Archdiocese guaran-



We went to the brink – and came back.”

Dr. John Connolly, the president of New York Medical College when interviewed by the New York Times in 1983

teed NYMC's debt of \$10 million (1978 dollars) and took over appointments to the College board, in a sponsorship arrangement that endured for nearly thirty years. In an extremely controversial move, the Archdiocese closed the storied Flower & Fifth Avenue Hospital and converted it into a continuing care facility, the Terrance Cardinal Cooke Health Center.

By 1978, the School of Medicine transferred its main operations to the Valhalla campus. The Graduate School of Basic Medical Sciences followed suit, while control of the Graduate School of Nursing was relinquished to Pace, now a University due to its affiliation with the School of Medicine. New York Medical College maintained affiliations with many city hospitals, but it also gained a new one on campus – the Westchester County Medical Center.

Due to a push by the American Medical Association for all residency programs to have a university affiliation, and unwillingness for many physicians to practice without an academic appointment, Westchester County endeavored to bring a medical school to the suburbs. In 1968, the county offered New York Medical College land on the Grasslands Reservation along with favorable rental terms on former Grasslands Hospital buildings. The National Institute of Health provided much of the funding to build the Basic Sciences Building. The next step was to build an academic hospital. By 1977, the Westchester County Medical Center was completed on the site of an old apple orchard, along with a new stretch of parkway to service it. The hospital went private in 1998 and was joined by the Maria Ferrari Children's Hospital in 2005.

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Compared to the way it was back then, the school is currently a thriving metropolis”

*Dr. Daniel Peters,
Class of 1984*

“

Flower and Fifth Avenue Hospital is no more. In its wake stands a new hospital, a new home. An era has ended only to mark a rebirth in Westchester.”

1979 yearbook, 'Odyssey'

Many of the current campus buildings were originally part of Grasslands Hospital Center, which predated Westchester Medical Center: Munger Pavilion, which now houses most clinical departments, was an adult tuberculosis hospital while Sunshine Cottage was a pediatric hospital. Animal imagery can still be seen in the architecture of Sunshine Cottage, although most of the statues are gone. Elmwood Hall, another former Grasslands Hospital building, served as the administration building in the decade before Sunshine Cottage was available. Vosburgh Pavilion has a previous life as a psychiatric facility (notice the fenced-in courtyard and small workrooms). New York Medical College owned the Mental

Retardation Institute (Cedarwood Hall, now the Westchester Institute for Human Development) but sold it to the county government when it proved financially unsustainable. The “MRI” is

distinguished in holding the first lecture of the Valhalla campus, as outfitting of the BSB auditoriums was behind schedule.

Today, on-campus housing is considered a staple of the NYMC experience, but for two decades Grasslands Housing was reserved primarily for second-year students. Private investors had planned to build 1,000 subsidized apartments, but protests from Westchester residents forced a substantial reduction, as reported by the New York Times in 1971. With few on-campus options, many first-year students lived in dormitories at Manhattanville College, Briarcliff in Tarrytown. Vosburgh Pavilion doubled as temporary dormitory even as psychiatric patients were still being admitted nearby. In 1981, Vosburgh Pavilion changed its mission and instead housed new Graduate School of Health Sciences, later renamed the School of Public Health, and finally to the School of Health Sciences & Practice by 2008.

Plans to replace the basic sciences building came and went over the decades. A 1984 “Master Plan” outlined the construction of a “Clinical Research and Education Center,” located between the Basic Sciences Building and the Institute for Human Development. The new building was to include a student center, five-hundred seat auditorium, library, dining facilities, and laboratory space. Munger Pavilion was to be overhauled, while Vosburgh Pavilion would have become a permanent dormitory by renovating the rooms previously used for psychiatric admissions. The plan also called for administrative offices to move from Elmwood hall (near the prison) to the statelier Sunshine Cottage – which actually did occur. However, a projected cost of \$50 million (1984 dollars) proved too ambitious to accomplish these goals all at once.

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“When I came here in 1971, it was a little flowerpot. It has since grown into a beautiful garden”

Delroy Chang, staff

Improvements to the College instead occurred incrementally over the ensuing decades: the Blue Auditorium stayed “blue,” but somewhere along the line Orange Auditorium was renovated into Terrance Cardinal Cooke. Courtyards that graced the center of each academic department were swallowed up to feed the BSB’s appetite for interior space (this explains why some offices have windows, but no view). Farmland occupied the rear of the College and was tended to by prisoners – this too disappeared – but a historic building on the estate was transformed into the Alumni House. The cafeteria expanded into the space once occupied by a much smaller bookstore, which in turn moved into the former instrument shop. A gargantuan, convex television fixture disappeared from the center lobby. Wall panels and bright red paint covered previously exposed brick and steel. Slowly, private investment expanded the number of Grasslands apartments, with the final building completed in the mid-1990’s along with a student center (rededicated in 2008). Finally, medical students and their families could live, mingle, work out, and barbeque on campus. But one component of the modern NYMC was still missing.

After nearly three decades of tinkering with the Basic Sciences Building, New York Medical College finally built its elusive dream building in 2001, thanks to a massive fundraising effort. The \$32 million Medical Education Center included a proper lobby, the larger Nevins

auditorium and updated study modules. The Health Sciences Library extended underneath the new structure and, capped with skylights, doubled in size. Previously segmented into ten small rooms, the anatomy lab moved into a single space on the top floor. Most of the old BSB classrooms were renovated into laboratories and offices, but vestiges can still be found: cardiac simulators now occupy two of the old cadaver labs, as does the graduate school conference room. The physiology library remains virtually unchanged as a former classroom, while Blue Auditorium also provides a window into the past. Desks and microscopes once filled the open space now enjoyed as a student lounge.

Previously trafficked by thirty years of medical students, the original entrance and lobby is difficult to find – but it's there. Half of it houses the extended security station. The rest is hidden behind a brick wall next to the MEC – but one can still find the marks where a doorframe and heaters were attached. Indeed, current students may never realize where their ancestors once toiled – but they were there, too. Thirty years after the odyssey began, the modern NYMC was born. It was now “our Valhalla.”



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Every yearbook staff since 1972

