

Sprinza Weizenblatt

Hope and Perseverance Bring a Brighter Future

In the late 1920s, Asheville ophthalmologist Harry Briggs went to Austria to study at the world famous Vienna Eye Clinic. While there, he met Sprinza Weizenblatt, a brilliant young doctor who spoke fluent English. She so impressed Dr. Briggs that he invited her to move to Asheville to be his associate, a position which paid \$100 a month. Arriving in 1928, Weizenblatt and Briggs practiced together several years, but Sprinza soon built her own large practice specializing in the treatment of eye diseases.



Sprinza raised prize-winning orchids, which she said reminded her of birds' eyes. She knew the Latin names of many flowers and had a love of nature, which she attributed to her father.

Dr. Weizenblatt

Sprinza developed an outstanding reputation among her patients for treating equally everyone who sought her service, black or white, rich or poor. Using a generous portion of her income, she maintained a cash box in the waiting room. If she thought a patient

could not pay for a treatment, the receptionist was instructed to take the required cash from the box and to tell the patient an unnamed benefactor had donated the money. She always had time for her patients, even during all hours of the day or night for emergencies, it was known they could count on her.

Philanthropy

Never forgetting her struggle for an education, she donated sizeable sums of money to educational institutions including UNC Asheville, Brandeis University, Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel and Montreat, Warren Wilson and Mars Hill Colleges. Her medical contributions include the establishment of the Memorial Mission Eye Service at Mission Hospital and a well-baby clinic on the Cherokee Indian reservation.

Learning

Sprinza had no time for idle chit chat, she told her neighbors. Throughout her career, she found time to conduct medical research, publishing her findings and presenting them at national and international conferences. Her voracious appetite for culture often took her on trips to New York City to see operas, plays and concerts, while leaving time to evaluate the newest instruments for eye surgery. "New York City was the closest thing to cosmopolitan Vienna she could get," remembers her friend Dr. Margaret Burns. Her thirst for intellectual entertainment also drew her to people and events at Black Mountain College (see photo). She was determined to learn something new every day.

Health

Her interest in fitness and good health served her well. She advised people in her instructive tone not to eat white bread and chocolate and told her great-niece to eat eggs if she wanted to grow. Ironically, Sprinza lost her sight for the last five years of her life. She died at the age of 92.

Sprinza Weizenblatt is remembered not just for her treatment of patients and her charitable contributions, but also for her zest for life and constant thirst for knowledge.



Sprinza Weizenblatt (1895 - 1987) was born in what is now Romania in the province of Bukovina in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. She and her family fled to Vienna, Austria before World War I in order to escape persecution.



Sprinza loved to travel and went all over the world, including Nepal, Russia, China where she observed acupuncture, Morocco, Kyoto Japan and Southern Africa with a group of physicians to care for people suffering from eye diseases. (Pictured above on the left she is on a trip to Mexico with Clementine Douglas, a weaver and owner of the Spinning Wheel craft shop.)



Sprinza at the Audubon Camp, Hog Island, Maine, 1951. Sprinza, just 4 feet 11 inches, was true to her name, Esperanza which is from Latin meaning to hope. She was direct, Germanic and professional with her patients, with a decided impish side. Dr. Anne Sagberg, an Asheville psychiatrist, remembered the first time she saw Sprinza, in 1956, at the age of 60: she was walking around a swimming pool on her hands. Sprinza took up surfing at the age of 70, and backpacked through Alaska carrying a 50-pound knapsack and pitching her own tent while in her 80s. She sent her great-niece a postcard saying that Alaska was wonderful, but she was having a little difficulty with the tent!

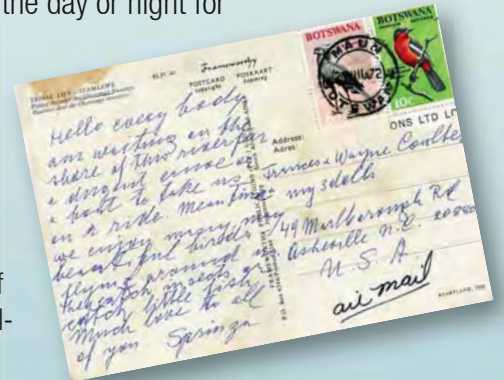


Vienna Eye Clinic (1926 or 1927). During a tumultuous political time in Austria this indigent, Jewish, woman overcame the odds against her success and was able to study through merit scholarships and a focused determination. Ranked first in her class, she was glad to wear her white medical coat to hide her worn clothing underneath. (Sprinza is in the center of the photo in the second row 7th from the left.)



Asheville's women physicians periodically had lunch together. The photograph above is a welcome lunch for Dr. Patricia Dodd who had just opened a surgical practice here (1957). Sprinza brought her a corsage made from an orchid grown in her greenhouse. When Dr. Dodd asked Sprinza how women doctors are treated here, Sprinza replied, "They are tolerated."

Seated from left to right: Charmen Carroll (psychiatrist), Irma Henderson, Louise Galloway. Standing: Margery Lord (second from left), Polly Shuford (third from left), Pat Dodd (fourth from left), Sprinza Weizenblatt (fifth from left), (unknown)



As intense about her hobbies as she was about her patients, Sprinza was an outdoor enthusiast who enjoyed backpacking in the Smoky Mountains and was an active member of the Carolina Mountain Hiking Club, the oldest hiking and trail maintaining club in Western North Carolina. (Sprinza is in the checked shirt in the front row on the left.)



Black Mountain College 1933-1957, a progressive college for the arts in the Asheville area. Sprinza would attend performances there and knew many of the faculty. She found her cultural peer group in the artists, writers and musicians who came here. Many had fled oppression in Germany when Hitler closed the Bauhaus. Hertha Horwitz, Sprinza's niece, remembers that Joseph Albers, head of the Painting Department who later went on to head the Yale University Department of Design, offered Sprinza a painting. She turned it down because she didn't like the colors. However, Albers' wife, Annie, an accomplished fabric artist, designed the fabric for Sprinza's home drapery and furniture.

