

## I am a Yale Nurse: Sharon Rising '67

**When Sharon Schindler Rising '67**, was a nursing student at Yale in the mid-1960s, she and her clinical instructor were checking a patient on the post-partum floor of Yale-New Haven Hospital. Rising asked the instructor what the routine was for putting on abdominal binders. When the instructor asked whether the patient needed binders, Rising thought she'd been misunderstood and repeated her question, "What's the routine?" The instructor asked again, this time a little more emphatically: "Do you think the woman needs one?"

That conversation occurred more than forty years ago, but if anything, it's only become more vivid to Rising as she's pursued her career and worked with students herself as a clinical professor at YSN.

"The instructors at Yale challenged us to think about what we were doing and to challenge where our assumptions were coming from," Rising says. "I absolutely credit Yale with teaching me how to think out of the box and be creative."

Rising's early lesson about questioning assumptions and thinking creatively powered her career as a nurse-midwife, teacher, program director and creator of a care model that is used by prenatal clinics around the world. In 2006, she received a Distinguished Alumna Award from YSN for her work, which includes developing and serving as director of Centering Pregnancy, a program that serves as a model for the delivery of group prenatal care.

Rising has been interested in nursing for as long as she can remember. "I think I was as young as four when I began talking about being a nurse," she says. "So it would be accurate to say I've had a long-standing interest in health care."

After graduating from Westmar College, in LeMars, Iowa, with a BA in biology, Rising was looking for a graduate program that would allow her to develop her research skills. She wound up taking a summer elective in nurse midwifery at Johns Hopkins University. "It was a totally transformative experience for me," she recalled. "We visited women in their homes and helped them with breastfeeding. I learned to do births and

helped empower women in the birth experience. This was a time in my life that tapped into a reserve of interest and energy I wasn't aware was there."

That experience opened Rising's eyes to the value of treating patients in groups. "After Hopkins, I wanted to do groups in clinic. I still think it's the best way to do post-partum care—listening to women, sharing experiences, answering questions." Rising's belief in the value of group care ultimately led her to develop Centering Pregnancy, her groundbreaking approach to caring for pregnant women.

The idea for Centering Pregnancy also grew out of Rising's own experience as an expectant mother receiving care at the Childbearing Childrearing Center at the University of Minnesota. During the last trimester of pregnancy, she and other patients with similar due dates met regularly to discuss their pregnancies, ask questions and talk about whatever was on their minds. "We developed a strong support system," Rising says. "I'm still in touch with some of those women and our kids are now in their thirties."

These experiences came together and instilled in Rising a belief that what pregnant women really want and need is to be together. "It just came to me clearly one day. We'd been doing prenatal classes for years, but the care piece was always done individually in exam rooms. There's nothing particularly private about a check-up, so why not do it as a group?"

Rising, who was working as a nurse-midwife after graduating from YSN in 1967, introduced her Centering

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Pregnancy model at the StayWell Health Center in Waterbury, CT and her timing couldn't have been better. By then stirrups, medication and episiotomies were being used less frequently and fathers were starting to be allowed in the birthing room. “There was a freedom for women to start taking control,” she recalled.

At around the same time, a major public health study—“Caring for our Future”—that looked at prenatal care was launched, but there was almost nothing in it that supported the kind of group care Rising was providing. If her model was going to gain widespread acceptance, Rising knew she needed data to assess its efficacy. So she did her own research with a total of thirteen groups, including three that were made up of teen mothers. The attendance was phenomenal: 92 percent for the teen-mother groups, and around 86 percent for the others.

The Centering Pregnancy care model has another benefit. According to Rising, patients tend to ask the same questions, so meeting in a group saves the health care provider from having to repeat herself, and frees her up to spend more time with the patients. “As providers we were so much happier,” says Rising. “We didn't have to say the same thing over and over again, and we learned so much from listening to our patients.”

“It became very clear to us that this was a better model of prenatal care,” Rising says. Since then, she's traveled around the world giving workshops and helping clinics start similar programs.

About 200 are now in operation. “From young urban professionals in Cambridge, to new immigrants and everyone in between, it's been very well-received,” Rising says. “I really think it's the way we should be doing care.”

In 1998, the Centering Pregnancy model was used to treat women with HIV. Again, it proved successful—a cohort study found that of women who delivered preterm, those in the Centering group were pregnant two weeks longer and the baby was one pound heavier than in the traditional-care group. A subsequent randomized controlled trial found an overall 33 percent reduction in preterm births among women in the Centering group. Work is now underway on another randomized controlled study in fourteen community health centers in New York.

Rising, who no longer does direct clinical work, is devoting her energy to running the non-profit Centering Pregnancy and Parenting Association. She's expanded her original vision into a centering model that extends throughout the lifecycle. Her group had its first national conference last March and plans another in 2008. They've also developed a site approval plan and have started doing site visits.

Rising believes the nation's health care system is broken and that it will take a major paradigm shift to fix it. Her decades of working with women have convinced her that group care is a big part of the solution. “Most of us would be a lot healthier if we just had some more time to connect with other people,” she says.

### **Distinguished Alumna/us Award 2006**

*On October 7, the YSN Alumnae/i Association presented its Distinguished Alumna/us Award to Sharon Schindler Rising for distinguished accomplishments. The following is the citation:*

Clinical scholar, teacher, educational program director, inventor, entrepreneur, politician and most of all, nurse-midwife, this alumna's work has broken important new ground in the provision of high quality, cost effective and more to the point, sensitive prenatal care. Descriptions of her work are replete with language about values: personal growth for both patient and provider; empowerment; the healing potential of being seriously attended to; holding clients and their stories in trust. Her work itself has been her “life journey,” a term she loans to capture the client/provider partnership. Starting small in Minnesota, where she not only created the practice site but also the nurse-midwifery graduate program, her work found another base back in Connecticut; it extends to more than fifty sites in the United States and Canada, and now, Australia. Research including randomized controlled trials supports the efficacy, effectiveness and transformative power of this “disruptive design” of prenatal care that throws away the illness orientation and managing risk view of pregnancy in favor of a dynamic union of clients in a group setting, and facilitative providers. Few in health service delivery can claim to have created a new model of care; this alumna has.

It does honor to the Yale School of Nursing and her alumnae/i association to recognize Sharon Schindler Rising of the Class of 1967 with the Yale School of Nursing Distinguished Alumna Award for 2006.