

# Beverly Malone

Once a reluctant leader, Beverly Malone inspires nurses with skills that earned her a seat alongside royalty



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It's a rhetorical question, but an honest one, as Beverly Malone, now the CEO of the National League for Nursing, looks over the breadth of her career.

"How," she asks, "does a girl from Elizabethtown, Kentucky, end up sitting next to Prince Charles?"

Proximity to British royalty was not an accident. The distinguished Malone – who holds a PhD in clinical psychology – spent five years as the general secretary of the Royal College of Nursing in Great Britain, essentially serving as the chief nurse for the nation.

"There's a little cartoon – the 'Cathy' comic strip – that shows her with all of these locks on her door," Malone says. "And Cathy says, 'Opportunity knocks, but by the time I get the door open, it's gone.' That has never been a problem for me. When opportunity knocks, open the door."

Malone didn't initially receive a warm welcome in the U.K. – some were angry that an American was chosen for the position – but is

grateful for the experience, which lasted from 2001 to 2006.

"I really believe that healthcare is a right and not a privilege, and their system personifies that," she says. "Even the most conservative people there – they don't question it. You are a human being; you deserve healthcare. How different that is from what we have here in the U.S. right now."

Malone says she also learned that all people, from the prince to

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then-Prime Minister Tony Blair – are all approachable as people, when you get right down to it.

"Everybody's human," she says, "and when it comes to nurses, we can work with everybody."

Malone was a reluctant leader who was raised by her great-grandmother in a segregated

part of Kentucky, someone who encountered a physician only once in the first 17 years of her life.

But her great-grandmother was the town healer, who mixed some basic medical knowledge with an uncanny knowledge of the herbs and plants around Elizabethtown that could ease ailments for people with no money and no access to healthcare.

"She was a bootlegger too," Malone remembers. "But everyone

who came to the house was told to bring a book as well, and she would ask people to read to me. I learned a lot living with her. Everybody kept saying, 'You're going to be a leader,' but I wasn't interested. All I really wanted to do was grow up and have children."

Malone did grow up. She did

get married, and have children. But with her great-grandmother's encouragement, she earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in nursing and psychiatric nursing, respectively. When it came time to choose a program for a PhD, she says she felt she bungled her interview to study clinical psychology at the University of Cincinnati.

"I figured I was not going to be accepted into a program where I spent the interview arguing with the head of the program over Sullivanian theory and Freudian theory. So, I decided to do the next best thing and have another baby – my daughter was 1 year old at the time."

There was just one problem. The program did, in fact, accept her. Her interviewer, Dr. Ed Klein, became one of her mentors. And so, she began a PhD program with a 2-week-old son and a

2-year-old daughter.

"That," she says with a laugh, "was challenging. I don't recommend it for anyone, but you do what you have to do, and so I did."

Malone says she thinks she knows why nurses often become sought-after administrative leaders.

"We go into a stranger's room, establish a relationship and provide services to them that other people can't do," she says. "You establish the intimacy of relationship with your patient that is healing in nature. I think that's what you do in all levels of leadership. People are looking for healing and a relationship and collaboration. That's a very powerful thing that we as nurses are able to do. And we give with authenticity."

The nurse who didn't want to be a leader, who now is a CEO, also served as president of the American Nurses Association. She also was

the U.S. government's deputy assistant secretary for health at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. She has even co-written a book on leadership: *Diversity and Cultural Competence in Health Care: A Systems Approach*.

Malone said she believes diversity in leadership is a work in progress, but is at least moving in the right direction.

"I always talk about it as a zig-zag growth." She says. You take two steps up and one step back. When you take the one step back, it actually feels like you went one step below your base, but you didn't. I believe wholeheartedly that we are continuing to move up."

With her celebrated journey from Elizabethtown to the upper echelons of American healthcare, Malone knows a thing or two about moving up. [MPI](#)

## Signature sayings

Beverly Malone, CEO of the National League for Nursing, is fond of using memorable phrases to illustrate her points on leadership. Here are a few:

**Excellence is leadership.** "That's exactly what nurses bring to the table."

**I can be delayed but not defeated.** "I am mission-driven. When you are working on something, especially something that is different and creatively unique, you might be delayed. It might take me a while to get there, but if there are things I am supposed to do, nobody can stop me from doing those things."

**Sometimes, you have to feed them with a**

**long-handled spoon.** "Not everyone will love you. You can't get close to everybody. But you still need to serve them. My responsibility is to feed them, but I don't have to get up close to do it."

**You can't lead unless you follow.** "Leadership is a dance. Sometimes, you lead. Sometimes, you follow. I have a healthy self-image, but sometimes I have to get out of the way so others can lead. I move back so others can move forward. And then, when I need to lead, I move forward."