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Sam Beam, RN: North Carolina's First Registered Nurse State Legislator

By: Phoebe Pollitt

Abstract

A column/essay on Sam Beam, RN -- North Carolina's first Registered Nurse State Legislator, who served in the NC House of Representatives from 1980-1984 and served as legislative assistant to the Speaker of the NC House of Representatives from 1984-1988.

Pollitt, P. (2021). Sam Beam, RN: North Carolina's First Registered Nurse State Legislator. *Tar Heel Nurse*, Special 2021 Legislative Issue, page 15. NC Docks permission to re-print granted by author.

Sam Beam, RN: North Carolina's First Registered Nurse State Legislator

By NCNA Member Dr. Phoebe Pollitt, RN; Nursing History Council Co-Chair

On a crisp, cold January day in 1981, Sam Beam walked into the Legislative Building in Raleigh. He was grinning, shaking hands, and looking for his new office. The prior November, voters in the 38th House District, encompassing parts of Gaston and Lincoln counties, elected Beam to represent their interests in the state capitol. Beam was about to become the first nurse to serve in the North Carolina General Assembly.

Beam was born in Homestead, Florida in 1947 and moved to the community of Cherryville in Gaston County in his youth. In 1967, he graduated from Central Piedmont Community College with his associate degree in nursing. Beam was featured in an

Sam Beam "will be a valuable ally for nursing and resource about nursing to other legislators." – Tar Heel Nurse; 1980

article in the *Tar Heel Nurse* in 1980. It read in part:

Sam has expressed support of the revision of the Nurse Practice Act and will be a valuable ally for nursing and resource about

nursing to other legislators. He comments: "It gave me great pleasure recently to address the 25th graduating class of Central Piedmont Community College, my old school. In preparing my speech, I began thinking of all the changes that had taken place in nursing. I could see how important it is for us to re-write the North Carolina Nurse Practice Act and to change the definition of nursing and the rules and regulations under which we work ... As the first registered nurse to serve in the North Carolina General Assembly, I will work for our profession."

Beam, who passed away this past July, had many talents and interests. In addition to being a registered nurse and former nursing home administrator, he was also a licensed contractor. He served in the North Carolina House of Representatives

from 1980-1984 and served as legislative assistant to the Speaker of the North Carolina House of Representatives from 1984-1988.

His broad community service included being a member of the North Carolina Disciplinary Hearing Commission for the State Bar Association, a member of Gaston College Board of Trustees, a member of the City of Cherryville Board of Adjustments, and a member of the Cherryville Planning and Zoning Board for over 25 years. He was married to nurse Ruth Beam until her death in 1993.

Sam Beam was the first nurse to serve in the state legislature, but he certainly was not the last and he has been followed by several other outstanding nurses in the following 40 years. Rep. Peggy Wilson served in the early 1990s, followed 20 years later by Rep. Diane Parfitt in 2010, for example.

This year, North Carolina nurses have a record high four of our own in the legislature. Recently re-elected are NCNA members Rep. Gale Adcock of Wake County, Rep. Carla Cunningham of Mecklenburg County, and Rep. Donna White of Johnston County. They are joined by newcomer Rep. Diane Wheatley of Cumberland County. We look forward to their service this session as they continue to lead *Nursing Forward*!

Are you interested in joining the Nursing History Council? We would love to have you! NCNA members are welcome to join any council they wish. To change your council status, simply update your Member Profile at www.ncnurses.org or email LaurenZahn@ncnurses.org.

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the view of the North Carolina Nurses Association or its board of directors. ■