

“The secret hardships, trials, and early life experiences of the medical school classmate/roommate and lifelong friend I thought I knew are revealed in this biography of a young girl born in rural East Tennessee in the 1940s, who with an envied combination of courage, determination, and resourcefulness, rose from poverty to become a prestigious and successful OB/GYN in Chattanooga, Tennessee—close to where she grew up. The qualities of responsibility, compassion, and love were never questioned as Phyllis ‘mothered’ Bozo, her curious puppy. As you follow the trials, disappointments, losses, and joys of this young woman, you start to realize that when one is surrounded by a loving and caring family that believes in you, no mountain is too tall to climb!”

*Dana Wallace, M.D.  
Allergy and Immunology Specialist  
Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.*

“This is a story that needs to be told. Teenagers need to hear that with persistence and courage they can overcome modest backgrounds. And extended families and teachers need to recognize how important they are. It was a pleasure and honor to serve patients with this outstanding clinician and leader.”

*B. W. Ruffner, M.D.  
Oncologist  
Signal Mountain, Tenn.*

“*Climbing Mountains* is a fine work based on the life of Dr. Phyllis Miller. While still in high school, Dr. Miller’s mother and father both passed away. She persevered and graduated from Polk County High School, Tennessee Tech, and the University of Tennessee Medical School. She came to Chattanooga to practice medicine and is now one of Chattanooga’s leading physicians. Along the way, she has headed up the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Medical Society and the Tennessee Medical Association. Her life is one of perseverance, courage, and accomplishment.”

*John Guerry  
Retired Business Executive  
Chattanooga, Tenn.*

“There are very special individuals who, despite many reasons and excuses to give up, choose to look forward, accept challenges, and face the odds in pursuit of a dream or goal. Phyllis Miller is unequivocally one of those people. During a time and under circumstances where the common expectation of her future would have been much more traditional, she chose to follow her heart, create her own path, and define her future. Demonstrating a solid plan executed with a true north grounded in the principles of excellence, hard work, humility, compassion, and kindness—no matter how daunting the challenge—is one of Miller’s most valuable legacies. *Climbing Mountains* captures a few highlights of Phyllis Miller’s remarkable personal and professional journey defined by persistence, personality, and adventure.”

*Rachel Miller-Tester  
Aviation Professional  
Chattanooga, Tenn.*

“Phyllis Miller is a physician, community servant and leader of physicians, and has been throughout her exemplary career. As the first woman to lead the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Medical Society and the Tennessee Medical Association, Dr. Miller has been a role model and mentor for many. As a beloved physician, she is considered one of the finest advocates for women’s health care. Her accomplishments are all the more remarkable when you understand the obstacles and challenges she had to overcome early in life. Her biography is a testament to tenacity, intellect, and sheer force of will as she journeyed from a small rural home without electricity and loss of both parents as a teenager to broad recognition as a physician leader and healer.”

*Rae Young Bond  
Chief Executive Officer  
Chattanooga-Hamilton County Medical Society*

# **CLIMBING MOUNTAINS**

Dr. Phyllis Miller's Onward, Upward Journey

**LYNELLE MASON**

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Published in the United States by Nurturing Faith Inc., Macon GA,  
[www.nurturingfaith.net](http://www.nurturingfaith.net).

Nurturing Faith is the book publishing arm of Good Faith Media ([goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org)).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN: 978-1-63528-102-6

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*\*A portion of the proceeds from the sale of Climbing Mountains will be donated to the Polk County Education Foundation to provide college scholarships for deserving students in Polk County, Tennessee.*

*I would like to thank Lynelle Mason for taking on this project of writing a book about my life. It has been a labor of love. My family and I will be forever grateful to her for this treasure.*

*—Phyllis Edwards Miller*



*I would like to dedicate Climbing Mountains to all of America's medical workers—past, present, and future—who daily risk their lives for others. During this pandemic we've come to know as Covid-19, I especially want them to know they're our heroes. Whether taking out the trash or working in a lab seeking a cure, each worker is vital to our recovery.*

*—Lynelle Mason*

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# Foreword

I have known Phyllis Miller since she was a medical student rotating on my service in surgery at the University of Tennessee College of Medicine in Memphis, where I was a senior surgery resident. Our association has continued through the decades, as we located to and practiced in the same city for most of our professional lives. My regard for her is such that you could describe me as a charter member of her fan club.

So, I am pleased with this written account of an unusually talented, charismatic, and brilliant woman who has left her mark not only on the lives of hundreds if not thousands of patients but also on organized healthcare through her unselfish and sensitive but forceful leadership.

As someone who also grew up in a poor, rural area in East Tennessee, the account of Phyllis' early life in rural, agrarian Polk County gave me a pleasant *déjà vu* experience. In addition to the advantage of her close-knit family, the recollection of the helping hands extended by members of her community and especially high school teachers demonstrates some of the huge advantages of growing up in rural America.

While the offering of such help by family, friends and community/school leaders is admirable, it is also essential that individuals have the intellect and drive to take those opportunities and make the most of them. Phyllis Edwards Miller took the opportunity and made the most of it. Reading this book gives added understanding of what shaped the life of such an outstanding woman, physician, healthcare leader, mother, and friend.

I enjoyed reading the history of her education, especially college and medical school. It points out the intense determination Phyllis had. Many of my family members have also attended Tennessee Technological University, and have enjoyed similar support and direction in their lives from special individuals at that school. I remember Phyllis as a medical school student in Memphis taking full advantage of clinical learning opportunities, unflinching in her pursuit of medical education.

While the leadership positions and other responsibilities she has achieved are impressive, perhaps the most important achievement for Doctor Miller is the impact she has had on the lives of so many patients and therefore their families. It has been my privilege to work as her colleague and evaluate and treat many of her patients. Her clinical ability and pragmatic, realistic evaluations of patients and their problems have always been impressive. In addition, her personal relationship

with and caring for those patients was and is unusually dedicated. She doesn't just know and understand their health problems; she knows them as a person.

Phyllis Miller, M.D., has been a trailblazer for women in medicine. The number of firsts she has achieved—including first woman president of the Chattanooga Hamilton County Medical Society, first woman chief of staff at Erlanger Medical Center, and first woman president of the Tennessee Medical Association—opened the doors for many other women to follow suit. She has proved that gender is not a determinant in doing an excellent job.

Along the way Phyllis has received several accolades for her career, including first woman to receive the Erlanger Baroness Lifetime Achievement Award and either the first or one of the first to receive the University of Tennessee College of Medicine Distinguished Alumnus Award. She also believes in giving back to others.

Twenty years ago, in gratitude to her parents for her upbringing and to the community that nurtured her, Phyllis labored to create the Polk County Education Fund that awards college scholarships to deserving students—33 at last count.

While I have benefited greatly from the professional relationship I have shared with Phyllis Miller, most importantly I appreciate her friendship. I am truly blessed that she has touched my life.

*Phillip Burns, M.D.  
Professor and Chairman, Department of Surgery  
University of Tennessee College of Medicine, Chattanooga, Tenn.*

# Introduction

The land inhabited by the Edwards family in 1947, two years after the end of World War II, bore a striking resemblance to the primitive surroundings in 1848 when it was home to the Cherokee Indians. This wild mountainous area in Polk County, Tennessee—nestled near Sheeds Creek and surrounded by yellow poplars, oaks, and towering pines—was destined to birth a very special child.

The box-shaped house put together by Arthur Edwards was subdivided into a living room, kitchen, two bedrooms, and an attic. The living room had a dilapidated, faded green couch; Lela B. Edwards' rocking chair; and a wood stove that became the family's main source of heat in the chilly winter months. The pipe of the stove connected to the chimney in the middle of the house.

Although President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Rural Electrification Act (REA) was established in 1935, it had yet to come to the southeastern hinterlands of Tennessee. The Edwards' farmstead had no electricity or running water. Indoor plumbing didn't exist, and necessary jobs required a trip to the outhouse. Nearby Sheeds Creek and a mountain spring provided drinking water, refrigeration, and water for general household tasks.

The family's outlet to the outside world was a battery-powered radio, a weekly subscription to *Grit Magazine*, and a 1940 Chevrolet—an old rattletrap with a mind of its own.

As shades of night began creeping over their farmstead, Lela, now great with child, began crumbling up old newspapers. Using the newsprint, she wiped the smut from the glass lamps that resided in each room of her house. Then she filled the base of the lamps with kerosene, trimmed their wicks, and lit them. Meanwhile, Arthur, returning from the fields, began washing up for supper.

Suddenly, Lela shouted: "Arthur, get me to the hospital! Our baby is ready to be born."

Arthur hurriedly splashed water over his grimy hands and dashed to the car. He tossed Lela's sheepskin coverlet over the open and corroded floorboard and then pumped hard on the starter key. Nothing happened. He waited a couple of minutes and tried again. Still the car didn't start. A self-styled mechanic, Arthur leaped under the car, twisted a few wires, and tried once more to start the engine. He drew a heavy sigh of relief when the motor began sputtering.

Lela groped her way out the back door and climbed into the car on the passenger's side. Arthur made a quick stop at his brother's house to drop off their young

son, Charles. Their next stop would be Cleveland, some 26 miles away. Lela tried to muffle her labor pains as they jostled along the first 14 miles over a rough-shod, dusty dirt road. The final passage road was somewhat smoother. Upon their arrival at the hospital, an attendant with a wheelchair rushed Lela inside.

On March 28, 1947, Lela Edwards gave birth to her second child, Phyllis.



*The Edwards Homeplace*