


HISTORY NOTE: Shriners have a long legacy of fellowship and service to children with disabilities



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As the longtime Twin Cities Shriners Healthcare for Children campus is readied for a new use by the University of Minnesota, people may ask, who are the Shriners? People with disabilities may be familiar with the organization through clinic visits or hospital stays. Others may see Shriners in area parades or at event, with members wearing distinctive fez hats.

The Shriners got their start in 1870s New York City, where members of the Masons fraternal order gathered for lunches. Among regulars at the Knickerbocker Cottage were Dr. Walter M. Fleming and actor William J. “Billy” Florence. They discussed starting a new group, centered on fun and fellowship, more than ritual.

Florence drew inspiration from an Arabian-themed party he’d attended while touring France. The exotic style, flavors and music of the Arabian-themed party inspired the theme for the new fraternity. Fleming used those ideas to develop the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, with an emblem, costumes, rituals and the distinctive red fez hat that members would wear. The first temple or chapter in the

United States was launched in September 1872. By the early 20th century there were chapters throughout North America.



Shriners Hospital offered many children's activities. This photo is from the 1930s.

The Shriners continued to grow, with dramatic growth after World War II. A Shriners history notes that a factor in the post-war growth was that soldiers wanted to continue their experience of camaraderie and service.

Much focus was on community service and fundraising to help others. One popular fundraiser, started in 1906, is the Shrine Circus, which is held around the nation.

One important effort supported by the Shriners is hospitals for children, which were started in 1920. There have been as many as 22 hospitals in the United States, Canada and Mexico. The first hospital was opened in 1922 in Shreveport, Louisiana. The Minneapolis hospital opened in 1923. For years the hospitals were able to provide free care for children under age 18. Many medical conditions are covered including orthopedic care, burn treatment, cleft lip and palate care, and spinal cord injury rehabilitation. By the 1930s, the average stay at Shriners Hospital was one to two years.

Shriners not only have supported the hospitals with a wide range of fundraisers, they also provided fun for children in the form of supplies for activities, gifts and special events for children.

The care policies changed in mid-2012 due to a shrinking endowment. Shriners Hospitals began billing patients' insurance companies, but still offered free care to children without insurance and waives all out of pocket costs insurance doesn't cover.

Today, there are nearly 200 Shriners International temples across North America, South America, Europe and Southeast Asia.

The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, www.mnddc.org or www.mncdd.org and www.partnersinpolicymaking.com.