

# Harmony Hill founder receives state honor

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Gretchen Schodde, of Union, is applauded by Gov. Jay Inslee (left) and other state leaders during the presentation of the Medal of Merit on Wednesday at the Capitol in Olympia. Schodde, who helped pioneer the University of Washington's nurse practitioner program, founded Harmony Hill Cancer Retreat Center in Union. Contributed photo

UNION — When Gretchen Schodde founded the Harmony Hill Cancer Retreat Center in Union in 1986, little did she know the far-reaching impact the center would have on cancer patients and their caregivers over the next 30 years.

The center's retreats, offered at no cost to cancer patients and their caregivers, focus on overall health and well-being, a response to cancer diagnosis that has become a national model.

Schodde's pioneering efforts in the world of health care garnered her one of the state's highest honors Wednesday: the Medal of Merit, an award bestowed for exhibiting "exceptionally meritorious conduct in performing outstanding services to the people and state of Washington."

The Legislature, as well as justices from the state Supreme Court and Gov. Jay Inslee, honored Schodde at a Capitol ceremony.

"I'm stunned," Schodde said before the ceremony. "I hope this gives legislators more awareness of Harmony Hill and compels them to share the story of Harmony Hill with their constituents."

Bill Gates Sr. and Les Purce, president of The Evergreen State College, both longtime supporters of Harmony Hill, nominated Schodde for the award two years ago, and along with several of Schodde's friends and family members showed their support for her in Olympia.

"She has had this dream for a long time," said Marilyn Boyden, Schodde's cousin. "She was destined to be a healer. She always wanted to help people. She wanted to go to medical school, but when that didn't work out it didn't stop her. This is what she was meant to do."

Schodde received her nursing degree from Tacoma General School of Nursing in 1966 and soon became a leader in the nurse practitioner movement in the state.

In fact, the last time Schodde stood before legislators was more than 40 years ago, when she testified on behalf of the nurse practitioner's movement.

Nurse practitioners are nurses with expanded skills who tend to basic care procedures that had traditionally been under the realm of doctors, like caring for common colds and the flu, treating simple infections, providing immunizations, birth control needs and more.

At the time, nurse practitioners were in need — especially in rural communities that did not have adequate medical services because they were too far from larger cities.

In 1973, Schodde became one of the state's first two nurse practitioners and started her work in Darrington, where someone had put up a sign that read, "This town needs a doctor."

Schodde went on to help pioneer the University of Washington's first nurse practitioner program, earning her master's degree along the way by leading courses and embarking on nearly a decade of teaching.

In 1986, she opened Harmony Hill and continued to serve her community as an emergency first responder, educator and volunteer for the next 30 years.

Schodde is now one of 32 people who has received the state's Medal of Merit; the Legislature also honored the late Nisqually tribal leader Billy Frank Jr., for his civil rights activism on behalf of indigenous peoples.

The Legislature presented the Medal of Valor, an award for bravery, to the city of Arlington, the Oso community, the Sauk-Suiattle Tribe and the town of Darrington, where Schodde started her career, for the courage displayed in the aftermath of the Oso landslide a year ago.

"The purpose of this joint session is to honor some of our state's most outstanding citizens," Lt. Gov. Brad Owen said. "(Schodde) is a groundbreaking health care

professional. She is an amazing and caring individual who is well deserving of our highest honor.”