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# The Face of Roanoke Public Health

After 24 years as public servant and 40 as practicing physician,  
Molly O'Dell is fighting the disease of a lifetime.

**T**HE CALL CAME ON MARCH 15 from a former colleague at the Virginia Department of Health. Could Molly O'Dell come out of retirement?

With a global pandemic nipping at the state's heels, the request was urgent. We need you, Dr. O'Dell, to coordinate the Roanoke region's response to the biggest health crisis in a lifetime.

"I know I have the knowledge, the skills, the ability," O'Dell remembers thinking. "A lot of my relationships in the community are still there. How can I say no?"

So on Tuesday, March 17, O'Dell, who had retired as director of the New River Health District in 2016 and had served as director of Roanoke City and Alleghany Health Districts from 1987 to 2006, and was hired by Dr. Laura Kornegay, acting director of the Roanoke and Alleghany districts, as well as director of Central Shenandoah Health District. Together they hashed out a plan.

O'Dell would serve as Director of Communicable Disease Control for Roanoke and Alleghany. Anything COVID-related would be hers.

Since then, O'Dell, 66, has absorbed massive amounts of information. She's put new procedures in place in an instant. She's managed personal protective equipment, consulted with nursing homes and jails, helped institutions ramp up testing capabilities, hired

investigators who could trace those who've come in contact with the virus.

Early on, she appeared in a first-ever televised public health forum in which area hospital leaders addressed community concerns. Overnight, she became the face of Roanoke's coronavirus fight.

This was never O'Dell's plan. Four years into her retirement, she expected to garden and forage this summer, to hike with her two grown children, teach a class at Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine and prepare for the publication of her second book of poetry.

But after 24 years as a public servant and 40 years as a practicing physician, after surviving divorce and two rounds of breast cancer, O'Dell was not about to sit on the sidelines when her community needed her.

The Roanoke region has been her home for six decades. She considers its people — all of them — to be her friends, her teachers, her responsibility.

"Molly won't rest until everybody is safe and sound," says Magda Peck, a colleague who worked with O'Dell in Omaha, Nebraska, to create that state's first school of public health. "It's not enough to treat one person. She needs the entire community to be whole."

## Health Care Pioneer

At a time when health care workers, grocery store cashiers, school teachers and local farmers are heralded as heroes, the spotlight

is also shining on the behind-the-scenes work of the nation's public health champions.

Think Anthony Fauci, Ohio Health Department Director Amy Acton, U.S. State Department's Deborah Birx. Roanoke's unsung public health leader is Molly O'Dell.

Her life story is one of breaking barriers and rising to challenges.

She's one of a family of seven, raised in South Roanoke. She enrolled at Longwood University with plans to become a nurse. A college professor inspired her to aim higher.

She became the first woman from Longwood to head directly to medical school when she entered what was then the Medical College of Virginia and is now the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine. As she pondered what kind of doctor to become, she had one overriding goal: "I knew I wanted to come back home."


O'Dell recalls how tough it was to be a young woman practicing medicine in Southwest Virginia in the 1980s. And also, how beautiful.

"The patients would not even check in," she says of her doctor's office on Buchanan's Main Street. "They knew where my son was and they'd walk to his little nursery in the back and just pick him up."

On Fridays, O'Dell made house calls. Sometimes she was paid in eggs or baked goods or offers to paint her house.

"I didn't know it at the time but it was the last vestige of being able to practice like that," she remembers.





## Another Side of Molly

Dr. Molly O'Dell is an accomplished poet and shared two of her poems with our readers:

**Glenna**

*tore her hand on the ring washer.  
Earl determined she'd see a doctor.*

*Newspaper told of this new lady doctor  
in town. Glenna said she'd go there.*

*Her wound, ripped like old wet tissue,  
needed an expert. Glenna wouldn't have it,*

*said I could do as good as any city  
doctor. She watched me fumble*

*the first stitch, then unraveled  
her life story while I sewed edges*

*that never matched. When we were both  
satisfied, she made a plan for me to check*

*her wound on my lunch break, said she'd  
rather fix me dinner than have some agency*

*inside her house. During daily dressings  
at her kitchen table, we watched Earl*

*come in from the fields and climb  
the back steps for dinner. When I left,*

*after dessert, the porch swing rocked them  
shelling peas or snapping beans.*

*By Molly O'Dell, from "Off the Chart,"  
published by WordTech Editions, 2015.*

**Once Weekly, As Directed**

*First, leave the asphalt  
to traverse spaces  
where ferns and their allies  
can't not grow,  
cross mountain streams  
to score your mind  
with the music  
of burbling water  
over rock  
so that lists, facts  
and details  
shrink to fit dimensions  
they deserve.*

*Then rest someplace  
where heat from  
sunlight or wood fire  
penetrates each and  
every sinew  
to completely relax  
your anatomical core.*

*By Molly O'Dell,  
from "Care is A  
Four Letter Verb,"  
to be published by  
WordTech Editions,  
March 2021.*

*Johnson*  
2020



She fell into public health when her medical insurance company stopped covering solo practitioners. She applied to be director of the Alleghany Health District and landed the position.

"I remember going in and telling the staff: 'I don't know anything about this. Give me a year to figure out how I can make your life better.' They taught me everything I needed to know about public health."

For 19 years, she battled teen pregnancy, a rise in sexually transmitted diseases, the arrival of HIV/AIDS, the obesity epidemic, budget cuts and the beginnings of the opioid crisis.

She was instrumental in the 1988 founding of the Child Health Investment Partnership (CHIP) of the Roanoke Valley. Its work — preparing children for first grade, developmentally, nutritionally, mentally — she saw as essential to improving public health.

"She has that big picture view," says Robin Haldiman, CHIP's CEO since 1996. "But she also connects with people. She understands them at a human level."

Somewhere in the swirl of seeing patients and cooking dinner, of raising her kids and rolling out education campaigns, O'Dell discovered she had a deep desire to tell stories.

So when her husband planned a move to Omaha in 2006, she went too. She earned a Master of Fine Arts in Writing from the University of Nebraska Omaha, even as she helped build a public health curriculum for the university, all while mentoring students and teaching classes there. In addition, she worked on a broad, health care company-led initiative to combat childhood obesity.

In 2010, O'Dell moved back to Buchanan, alone. She stepped into a familiar role as director of the New River Health District, where she tackled Zika virus prevention, the effects of poverty on health, the drug use that was infecting her community.

But her writing joined her now as she walked through her days. In 2015, she published her first book of poetry, a collection centered around her early years as doctor and mother.

By 2016, she was ready to shift the balance: more writing, fewer meetings; more



contemplation, fewer conversations about intractable societal problems.

"When I retired, the two things I was most looking forward to were not multi-tasking and not hurrying," she says.

But then an unknown virus swept the globe, upending everyone's lives — including O'Dell's.

## Trusted Leader Takes Charge

When O'Dell was named communicable diseases director for Roanoke and Alleghany, residents across the region collectively exhaled. From the out-of-luck mother she'd treated at the health department clinic to the Buchanan town leaders who've worked alongside her since the 1980s, the folks O'Dell encountered over her career trust her calm competence and value her persistent problem-solving.

"I was so relieved when she was put in charge," says author Beth Macy, who consulted O'Dell when researching her latest book, "Dopesick." Macy has interviewed O'Dell for in-depth reporting projects over three decades.

"She's not afraid to say the truth and we're learning now that that's so important," Macy says.

O'Dell's early days on the job felt like trying to stand beneath a raging waterfall.

She had technology to master, a far-flung staff to connect with, new guidelines to adopt on everything from restaurant safety to death certificates.

"And then it all changes the next day, right?"

She held her first meetings in parking lots, so she could safely introduce herself to health department employees, explain what her responsibilities would be, answer anxious questions.

Eventually, she wrangled her duties into a manageable routine: daily and weekly conference calls with health directors throughout the state, communicable disease experts, city and county leaders, the media. She oversaw the handling of nursing home protocols and essential store safety plans.

Through it all, she leaned on time-tested techniques of

collaboration and seeking input from a variety of community resources.

"With an interdisciplinary approach, you work through the issues together," O'Dell explains. "It's so easy when you know what the goal is, which is keeping the most people healthy and safe as you can with what your resources are."

If there is any upside to the devastation that COVID has wrought, it's that the role of public health is becoming clearer to everyone, O'Dell says.

"The core of public health is preventing disease and protecting the public," she says. "And so once you have a communicable disease, it's case investigation and contact tracing. We've been doing that forever. Nobody ever gave a hoot about that. And now it's so important. For the average guy to understand COVID, they need to know a little bit about immunology and a whole lot about public health."

No one knows how harshly the coronavirus will shake the Roanoke Valley before it's through. But O'Dell is not afraid. She believes public health protocols will be a bridge to the other side of this crisis.

"There are systems in place to protect us and help us do the right thing," she says, speaking from the heart and from decades of on-the-ground experience. "That's the part that's comforting." ☆