

Kress, Laretta Eby

(1863–1955)

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Laretta Eby Kress, the first female physician to practice in Montgomery County, Maryland, was widely respected for her skill as an obstetrician and her expertise in women's health and prenatal care. She and her husband, Daniel H. Kress, founded Adventist sanitariums and promoted public health in England, Australia, and the United States.¹

Early Life and Marriage

Laretta Eby was born in Flint, Michigan to Aaron Eby and Hannah Amelia Burkhart Eby on February 10, 1863. Her father, a Canadian-born blacksmith, and her mother, a school teacher, met in Howell, Michigan, married in June 1857, and moved to Flint. Laretta graduated from high school in Flint at the age of 16, and subsequently taught at a school in Michigan. Though a young woman with a small frame, she could command the attention of her most unruly students.²

Laretta was quite outgoing, and on a visit to Canada she met and began a long-distance courtship with Daniel H. Cress. They were married in Genesee, Michigan, on July 9, 1884.³ Laretta had a powerful influence on Daniel though he assumed the traditional male leadership role. It was at Laretta's request that Daniel Cress began spelling his last name as Kress with a "K" instead of a "C".⁴ Later, she influenced her husband to quit drinking and smoking. Laretta gave birth to their first daughter, Eva, on May 13, 1885 and to a second daughter, Ora, on November 7, 1888.⁵



Dr. Laretta E. Kress

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

The Kresses became active in the First Baptist Church in Flint. Daniel was issued a license to preach and became pastor of the Baptist church in Davisonville, Michigan, in the summer of 1887. Meanwhile, Laretta, after engaging in a series of Bible studies with a young Seventh-day Adventist woman, Emma Ferry, determined to observe the Sabbath on the seventh day. Although she did not resist her husband's restrictions against going to any meetings held by the "seventh day" people, reading their literature, or even mentioning "Sabbath," to him, Laretta did not give up her conviction. Not long afterwards, though, Daniel, with further prompting from a fellow Baptist preacher, studied the matter for himself, accepted the seventh-day Sabbath, and resigned from his Baptist pulpit in Davisonville after less than two months there.⁶

Adventism and Medical Training

Presentations by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg on diet and its effects on health a few weeks later at the Michigan Conference camp meeting made a strong impression on the couple. In 1888 they were called to Battle Creek to run a new school opened by the denomination for German and French speaking students. The next year, with the language school having been moved out of Battle Creek, Laretta took a course in "scientific cookery" taught by Ella Eaton Kellogg (wife of J. H. Kellogg) while Daniel attended a ministerial institute conducted from December 1889 to May 1890. After becoming one of the first graduates of Mrs. Kellogg's cooking course, Laretta was asked to teach the subject herself as part of a health and temperance course at Battle Creek Sanitarium.⁷

In 1890, Dr. Kellogg recruited both she and her husband to study medicine. Along with a group of fellow Adventists, they took their first year of studies (1890-1891) at Battle Creek Sanitarium and the following three at the University of Michigan Medical School in Ann Arbor, where the sanitarium purchased a home for the Adventist students. Laretta was appointed matron, and thus was in charge of the room arrangements, the meals, and everyone's work assignments around the house. Initially a cook was hired but the arrangement did not work out so that responsibility for preparation of the meals fell to Laretta. Managing all of this in addition to her studies and looking after her two small daughters required creativity and a high level of organization. During the evening study period, one student read the lessons out aloud while "pies, cakes, entrees, etc." were prepared for the next day. The students made synopses of the lessons and "quizzed each other as we walked back and forth to the campus and hospital, or when working about the house."⁸

After her third year, in the summer of 1893, Laretta was one of the students who attended the Chicago World's Fair to manage the exhibit for the Battle Creek Sanitarium. She and Daniel both graduated from the University of Michigan Medical School in 1894, she specializing in obstetrics and gynecology and he in gastrointestinal disorders. Laretta was vice president of the graduating class and one of ten women in the class.⁹

Medical Missionary: England and Australia

The doctors Kress returned to Battle Creek in 1894 and worked as physicians at the sanitarium for the next five years. Laretta's responsibilities included the 152 children in the Haskell Home for Orphans. The Kresses also took disadvantaged children into their home, eventually reaching a total of 11, raising them with the help of a governess.¹⁰

In 1899 the Kresses accepted a call to open the church's medical missionary work in England. Along with their two daughters the family now included a son, Paul, whom they adopted in Battle Creek. Laretta and Daniel gave health lectures throughout the nation, helping to build interest in a new sanitarium opened near London on September 2, 1899, at a property called "Dunedin" in Meadvale, Surrey Hills. In a lecture on "Clothing the Body" that she gave at several locales, Laretta used a dress she designed to demonstrate a more healthful way to dress for women in an era when very tight corsets remained the norm.¹¹

Just a few weeks after the sanitarium opened, the Kress's 14-year-old daughter Eva suffered a relapse of the endocarditis first diagnosed before the family left Battle Creek and died on October 16, 1899. The combined stress of hectic travel, overwork, and grief at the loss of his daughter soon overwhelmed Daniel, and Laretta convinced him to take some time recuperating in France. This left her alone to manage the sanitarium, a responsibility she held for nearly a year, though at times she thought the burden would be too great. Daniel returned to London in the spring of 1900 but, at the advice of Dr. Kellogg, returned to the United States in June. Laretta remained in charge of the sanitarium another three months, returning to Battle Creek in September.¹²

Less than a month later, the Kress family departed for Australia, once again assigned to develop medical missionary work that was in its infancy. While a new sanitarium was under construction in Sydney, they made their headquarters at the Avondale Health Retreat, a small, 15-bed treatment center in Cooranbong. With Daniel away giving lectures much of the time, Laretta made quite a mark serving the small community and surrounding rural areas where physicians, much less a woman physician, were rarely seen. She was called upon to meet a wide variety of emergencies in the "bush country" such as extracting teeth, treating burns, black spider bites, contagious diseases and ailing horses, along with delivering babies.¹³

Amidst all of this, Daniel became seriously ill with pernicious anemia—a life-threatening condition that was untreatable prior to discovery of Vitamin B-12. It appeared that he would die but, likely aided by counsel from Ellen White to add eggs to his overly abstemious diet, he recovered and served as medical director of the new Sydney Sanitarium that opened its doors on January 1, 1903.¹⁴ After the joy of the establishment of the sanitarium, Laretta experienced personal joy in the birth of a son, John, in May 1902. Unfortunately, a fall from his high chair left John permanently impaired and he lived with his parents until his death in 1954.¹⁵

Washington Sanitarium, Takoma Park, and 3,000 Babies

After spending nearly eight years in Australia, the Kresses were called back to the United States in 1907 to give leadership to the start up of another sanitarium. The Washington Sanitarium opened June 12, 1907, in Takoma

Park, Maryland, the Washington, D.C. suburb in which the General Conference had located its headquarters after departing from Battle Creek in 1903. Daniel was appointed medical director. Laretta, as part of the sanitarium medical staff, became the first woman physician to practice in the history of Montgomery County, Maryland.¹⁶ Daniel traveled frequently giving lectures, leaving to Laretta administrative duties at the sanitarium such as managing the staff and organizing training for nurses, above and beyond her own practice focused on expectant mothers and newborns.¹⁷

In 1911 the doctors Kress, called to join the faculty of the College of Medical Evangelists at Loma Linda, moved to southern California with their daughter, Ora, recently graduated from the Woman's Medical College in Philadelphia. Laretta taught pediatrics and gynecology and, with her husband, conducted "schools of health" or lecture series in the nearby cities of San Bernardino, Redlands and Riverside. New opportunities soon had them on the move again—first to the Chicago area and Hinsdale Sanitarium in 1912, and then to Massachusetts in 1913 where Daniel served as medical secretary for the Atlantic Union Conference and both Laretta and Ora worked at New England Sanitarium.¹⁸

Four years after their departure, the Kresses moved back to Takoma Park in the summer of 1915. This time they stayed for 24 years. Both doctors connected again with Washington Sanitarium. Daniel also served as the Columbia Union Conference medical secretary, 1915-1918, and devoted much of his time over the next two decades to speaking and writing about the ill-effects of smoking. In 1916 Laretta opened the Kress Maternity and Children's Hospital—connected with the San but also a distinct unit with its own doctors and nurses, treating exclusively expectant mothers and children.¹⁹

In 1918 the Kresses acquired a large home at 705 Carroll Avenue (now 7265 Carroll Avenue) directly across from the San that they would name "Krestview." Laretta had the basement remodeled in 1925 in order to use it as her medical office. At Krestview, she delivered more than 3000 babies. On their 50th wedding anniversary in 1934 the Kresses hosted a party and invited "everyone that we have brought into the world since we began the practice of medicine." More than 600 people arrived and were captured in a massive group photo on the creek bank next to the house.²⁰

Dr. Kress was often featured in Washington, D.C. newspapers for her accomplishments and findings as a physician. In 1934, for example, a *Washington Post* article entitled, "Mothers Too Fond of Cocktails and Sports for Babies' Health, Thinks Doctor," highlighted her commentary on prenatal and infant care. At a time when women were largely unaware of the negative effects of alcohol and smoking during pregnancy, Dr. Kress stated that pregnant mothers who drink and party "hurt themselves as well as their children."²¹ Smoking, drinking, and partying had come to symbolize the liberation of women during the second wave of feminism in the 1920s and 1930s. In speaking against this trend, Laretta sparked a conversation that became an absolute rule of prenatal care decades later.

Dr. Kress celebrated her 75th birthday in 1938 by helping to deliver her 4,150th baby. She also, according to a newspaper report, denied any thought of retirement.²²

Later Life and Legacy

Finally in 1939, Laretta and her husband with their son John retired to Orlando, Florida, and joined the Winter Park church. They were active in the church and with traveling, writing and speaking. But due to the shortage of physicians during World War II, they returned to full-time service for two years as physicians at Florida Sanitarium and Hospital.²³ Laretta again came out of retirement briefly in 1948 to deliver her 4,388th baby.²⁴

Laretta and Daniel celebrated their 70th anniversary in July 1954 while she was in hospital recovering from a stroke. She recovered enough to return home and died there, aged 92, on June 28, 1955.²⁵

“Dr. Laretta has made Dr. Kress what he is,” the Kresses’ son-in-law, Dr. Will Mason, stated after overhearing a conversation filled with high praises for Daniel.²⁶ That accomplishment stands alongside the distinct achievements of Dr. Laretta Kress as a pioneering medical missionary, organizer, educator, obstetrician and expert on women’s health.

The Winter Park Seventh-day Adventist church named its new edifice, completed in 1954, the Kress Memorial Church in honor of the doctors’ historic contributions to Adventist medical missionary work.²⁷ The guests at their 50th wedding anniversary celebration in 1934 summed up their legacy by awarding each an honorary L.L.D. degree for “life lovingly dedicated.”²⁸

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