

Let's hear it for the boys

Diversity in nursing—including nurses of all genders, races, ethnicities, and backgrounds—ensures empathetic and equitable patient care.

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TO SAY that 2020 has been noteworthy so far would be an understatement. Globally, COVID-19 has rewritten what it means for humans to interact socially with one another safely. As a result, nursing school pinning and graduation ceremonies across the United States were canceled. Those of us graduating with nursing degrees during the pandemic understand the importance and complexity of protecting public health. So, while disappointed, few graduates were genuinely irritated about not being able to finish our degrees with the usual pomp and circumstance.

Our accomplishment is bittersweet. After all, 2020 is the International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife, in honor of the 200th anniversary of Florence Nightingale's birth. Entering the public's most trusted profession under this banner adds to new graduates' pride. At the same time, kicking off our career during a pandemic

is eerie. Expectations are high, as are the stakes.

My alma mater did a nice job of continuing the end-of-program ceremonies despite the social distancing mandates. Each student could submit a picture with their selected pinner, which would become part of a virtual slide show. I decided not to submit a picture. And, to be honest, I was initially fine with missing the pinning ceremony. Classmates had mentioned since orientation that pinning was a more intimate affair, more meaningful event, than actual graduation. But, I didn't get it. I questioned why placing a pin on my lapel would be celebrated as much as, or even more so than, earning a university degree. The ceremony seemed to be a gendered tradition in an already overwhelming female profession.

Then I read about the ceremony's history.

Nursing's pinning ceremony has a nearly millennia-long history, rooted in the Crusades. Monks of the Knights of the Order of the Hospital of St. John the Baptist, who pledged to care for infirm soldiers, received a Maltese cross badge as a symbol of their vows. Florence Nightingale reinvented the ceremony in the 1860s after she was presented with the Red Cross of St. George for her work during the Crimean War. Subsequently, she awarded medals to excellent nursing graduates, which was standardized in the United States by 1916.

The history lesson left me simultaneously empowered and deflated. It added the exclamation point to graduation that I was missing, knowing that I was joining a rich history in taking care of others. But, I was a little dismayed by the muted visibility and significance of male nurses (e.g., monks) in this symbolic rite of passage. Nursing continues to struggle to reach an equitable number of applicants and matriculants across gender and ethnic categories. Only 15% of my graduating class was male; the next class's percentage will drop to a mere 5%.

The numbers of nurses who are men are

still so few, and gender stereotypes so strong, that we self-title as “Murse.” It isn’t that male nurses are afraid of being assumed to be female, gay, or to exhibit stereotypical feminine traits, like empathy, that make successful nurses. Rather, it is an attempt to embrace our “otherness” in the field, celebrate our uniqueness and pride, and label ourselves, albeit comically, to advertise for potential initiates. It’s an opportunity for us to offer other examples of men who have played a historic role in nursing, such as:

- **St. Camillus de Lellis**, the patron saint of the sick, hospitals, nurses, and physicians, and founder of first ambulance service and first home hospice
- **Luther Christman**, who established the National Male Nursing Association and was the first man to be inducted into the hall of fame of the American Nurses Association (ANA)
- **Joe Hogan**, an African American nurse who fought for ending sex discrimination in publicly funded nursing schools
- **Walt Whitman**, American literary treasure

and nurse, who captured his experiences in his poem “The Wound Dresser”

- **Edward L.T. Lyon**, the first male nurse commissioned as a reserve officer in the U.S. Army Corps
- **Ernest J. Grant**, current President of the ANA and a man of color.

During this year of reflection, I offer that we should simultaneously plan for future growth into the next millennium of care. In addition to this year’s global Nightingale Challenge to provide leadership and development training for 20,000 nurses and midwives aged 35 and under, let’s remember that numbers are only part of fulfilling the need. Nursing needs more caregivers who represent our patients. The more diversity we bring to nursing, the more empathy we can provide. This will include more men.

Let’s hear it for the boys (men) in nursing—past, present, and future. Shout it loudly enough that more hear the call and make the pledge. **AN**

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must use that teamwork mentality to promote the growth of generations to come. As the nation’s most trusted profession, we should have a sense of duty to safeguarding nurses’ role as advocates for the rights of those who can’t speak for themselves. Using collaboration and mentorship to ensure that the youngest voices of our profession are stronger and louder than previous generations is more than a choice—it’s a commitment to the legacy of nursing. **AN**

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Need creates opportunity

According to Auerbach and colleagues, an estimated 80,000 nurses are set to retire annually by the end of this decade, taking with them a wealth of knowledge and experience. This shift creates an opportunity for millennials to move into leadership positions, not only in traditional healthcare organizations but also in the communities they serve. In fact, it’s imperative to resolving the state of our healthcare system.

Laurie Benson, BSN, RN, executive director of the Nurses on Boards Coalition, works with her organization to engage with millennials and ensure they recognize the importance of serving in leadership roles and engaging in board service in communities where they live and work to improve health across the nation (nursesonboardscoalition.org/about). The demand for nurse leaders to serve in expanded roles is increasing, and Benson believes that if newer nurses don’t recognize, create, and act on these opportunities, the profession will miss the window of opportunity to elevate the roles, perspectives, and collective impact of nurses.

But it’s not only millennials who should step up and mobilize community change. Benson encourages nursing students, nurses new to practice, and those with significant experience to find their seat at the table on local, state, national, or global community boards.

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