

Nursing is LIFE!

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I have been a registered nurse for 31 years. My path to determining that I wanted to be a nurse was more crooked than straight, and I am grateful. I never had any role models in nursing or people who were sick, which made me see this profession as a calling. I found nursing at a time when I needed to do something better with my life. As a young adult, I was floundering, and someone threw me a lifeline at a critical point in my life.

Now that I'm here, it is my best LIFE decision. I want to emphasize that because I heard a TV evangelist say years ago that we make over 30,000 daily decisions, and every decision we make breathes life or could facilitate death.

As I started my journey into the field, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do other than find an environment where I felt like I belonged. I found that in the Operating Room after my first hour in that environment. The teamwork and interdependency appealed to me, and it fed my love for anatomy and physiology. I just loved reading and now seeing up close, how the body works!

So, 31 years later, I now find myself in the policy and advocacy space. As the Director of Nursing Programs at the Ameri-

can Nurses Association (ANA), overseeing nursing practice and work environment issues, and Healthy Nurse, Healthy Nation (HNHN), a free program focused on nurses' overall health and well-being, I consider myself blessed to be in this position. I can convene nurses from around the country to understand their concerns and challenges and be their human megaphone through media interviews, podcasts, articles, blogs, and even speaking on Capitol Hill. I can crack the door open for nurses who feel they never had a voice to be heard and at the table. I can partner with our governmental and legislative affairs team to ensure the right voices are heard for policy making. I can also partner with ANA state affiliates and their constituents nationwide on nurses' issues.

The windy path to where I am today came with many triumphs, tribulations, and tears. From my experience as a staff nurse when I found myself outside of a clique and paid dearly for it, to my first experience in leadership when I was more task-oriented than people-oriented (which didn't go well until I blended both) to my time as a Chief Nursing Officer, I am grateful for all these experiences.

We are a constellation of our experiences and exposures - the academic preparation, experiential learning, and mentorship that mold us during our journeys.

As much as nursing is one of the most challenging academic programs to complete, the profession of nursing itself is also one of the most challenging jobs on the planet. I recall a newly graduated nurse telling me that she doesn't believe that there is any job that requires so much from so many people within a finite period than nursing. One of my favorite songs is by Maxwell, a Grammy award-winning R&B artist, titled "A Woman's Work" where he lays out all the work women are expected to do in their lifetime. What about "nurses' work"? If I were to write the lyrics to that song, it would be about ALL that is required and expected of nurses while on and off duty. After nurses are done with their day, they carry the emotions from their experiences while at work, and home with them. We continue to be caregivers to our loved ones, and we are the providers and advisors of care for everyone in our households and beyond. How many neighbors or friends call us for clinical advice? If we are out and about as regular members of society and recognize someone is in distress, we heed the call and respond accordingly. Nurses are great at other care and are terrible at self-care and setting boundaries for our recuperation and recovery.

A character from Ted Lasso was known to exuberantly say, "football is life!" Well, nursing is also life! Nursing gives and extends life. I always say that we have the privilege of being with people at the best and worst times of their lives. That is also giving life. We give life every time we give advice in our communities or care for those we love in our own households.

The death part comes with moral distress and improper care of ourselves mentally, spiritually, socially, financially, and physically. Are we making poor decisions about our health by canceling doctor's

appointments, or not staying on top of our checkups, and choosing not to speak up about technologies and relationships that seem to work against us by making our work harder? Being overwhelmed with school loans and not engaging in proper financial planning for retirement. Not exercising, not sleeping well, drinking too much alcohol, engaging in poor eating habits? How about refusing to seek mental health support even when it seems pretty clear that we need it? These are “death” decisions. This is our gut check. The path to engaging in self-care is self-love. Do we love ourselves and our families enough to get back on track?

So, back to life - to say that nursing has given me an unbelievable life is an understatement, and I am nowhere near done. My goal is to continue giving life to extend my support to nurses around the globe. I am completing my ICN Global Nurses Leadership Institute program this June. This program has opened my eyes to understanding nurses’ challenges in other countries. I plan to address more social issues that impact nursing and healthcare overall. These social issues do not sit outside of the profession, they have been intricately woven into it before the birth of nursing. I plan on continuing my advocacy work to ensure that nurses’

voices are heard, recognized, and incorporated into policy. Yes, even though I am no longer in practice I still long for the old days of being able to scrub for a craniotomy; I strongly believe that I am a giver of life. I give life to thousands of nurses out there. Even though many of them would never know my name or impact, I am content and fine with that.

Let’s continue to be givers of life by taking care of ourselves and recognizing the impact that we are having on the world. We have been voted as the most trusted and ethical profession for 22 years in a row for a reason. Nursing is LIFE! ■

Navigating Pregnancy and Beyond

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Becoming a mother should be an exciting time, but for many birthing persons, it can be filled with excessive worry, stress, and anxiety. Imagine finding out you are pregnant and do not have stable housing, feel trapped in an abusive relationship, or struggle with a substance use disorder and have to choose between using a drug that may harm your unborn baby or having to endure excruciating withdrawal symptoms. For many moms, finding access to high-quality, respectful

prenatal care can be challenging. Pregnancy and childbirth are often a birthing person’s first extended interaction in the healthcare system as an adult. As a result, pregnancy may reveal underlying chronic conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and mental health disorders that often require chronic care management beyond the perinatal period. Navigating a complex healthcare system can be overwhelming for anyone, but especially for those who may have lower healthcare literacy and those from vulnerable populations who have a greater risk of experiencing healthcare bias and inequities.

Breaking down barriers to care

Patient navigation is an evidenced-based healthcare intervention designed to provide patient support and help break down individual barriers to care (Budde et al., 2022). Patient navigators and nurse navigators are used in a variety of healthcare settings. Oncology is one of the most studied settings for nurse navigation programs. It has shown improved patient outcomes, such as shortening time frames

from screening to diagnosis and from diagnosis to treatment, and positively affecting a patient’s quality of life and the patient experience (Chan et al., 2023). Evidence also supports that patient navigation interventions can decrease healthcare costs. Navigators can have different backgrounds and education levels depending on the type of setting and services they provide (Budde et al., 2022). Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs) are well positioned to provide optimal patient support and navigation due to their education, experiences, knowledge, and understanding of the complex healthcare system. APRNs can bring a unique clinical perspective and skill set to patient navigation. As the landscape in women’s healthcare continues to evolve, nurse navigators may provide an opportunity to improve health disparities that persist in this population and influence health outcomes (McKenney et al., 2018).

Improving maternal outcomes

According to Healthy People 2030, social determinants of health (SDOH) are the conditions in the environments in which people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affects a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risk (Office of Dis-