

From CNA to NHA: A Nurse Leader's Journey Through Resilience, Education, and Purpose

By Tashauna Clarke, BSN, RN, IPC



Leadership in nursing does not always begin with a title. For many of us, it begins in moments of uncertainty, adversity, and quiet determination. My journey into nursing leadership did not start in a boardroom or classroom. It began in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), standing beside an incubator, looking at my daughter who weighed just 1.5 pounds at birth. As a Jamaican immigrant and new mother facing the fragility of a premature infant, fear was constant. Yet while my daughter fought in the NICU, I made a decision that would shape the trajectory of my life. I immediately began nurturing the vision of becoming a nurse.

During that time, I worked night shifts at a casino to provide income, and during the day I attended Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) classes through the Workforce Development Department at Delaware Technical Community College. Sleep was limited. Resources were scarce. But purpose was clear. In 2019, I became a Certified Nursing Assistant.

The CNA Foundation: Discipline Under Pressure

Six months into working as a CNA, I applied to the Delaware Skills Licensed Practical Nurse program and was accepted on a full scholarship into the intensive 10-month, Monday-through-Friday curriculum. At the time, my husband had recently asked for a divorce. Although I expressed having family support, the reality was that my primary support was structured daycare during school hours and determination outside of them.

To sustain my household, I worked per diem CNA shifts on the weekends and supplemented income through Amazon Flex and DoorDash. My days were spent in lectures and clinicals. Evenings were devoted to my children, both of whom required frequent medical appointments and additional support. Weekends often meant working additional shifts to ensure stability. Those seasons strengthened my discipline and clarified my leadership values: responsibility, consistency, and perseverance.

Advancing: LPN to Accelerated RN

After completing the LPN program, I began working as a nurse while completing prerequisite courses for the accelerated LPN-to-RN program at Delaware Technical Community College. I applied — and was offered a seat on my first attempt.

The three-semester program was academically rigorous and personally demanding. I was raising two children with special healthcare needs, managing physician appointments, school meetings, and employment.

Despite the intensity, I graduated from the Associate Degree in Nursing program cum laude. During that time, I also experienced one of the most defining challenges of my academic career. On the second-to-last day of clinical rotation, another driver ran a red light and t-boned my vehicle. Imaging later confirmed a concussion and tears in my lower back. With clinical requirements and a comprehensive final exam within days, I completed my clinical rotation and sat for my exam — earning the highest score I achieved throughout the accelerated program. Resilience, I learned, is not the absence of hardship. It is disciplined forward movement despite it.

Leadership Beyond Academics

My time at Delaware Technical Community College shaped more than my clinical competence — it shaped my leadership identity. While completing my ADN and BSN, I:

- Volunteered with the Delaware Food Bank food drives on campus
- Served as a Student Orientation Leader

“Leadership is not inherited. It is built — semester by semester, shift by shift, decision by decision.”

- Ran for and was elected Student Government President at the Stanton Campus (2022–2023)
- Participated as one of the first members of the President’s Student Leadership Academy at Stanton
- Became a member of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society and Served as President for Student Leadership in 2022

I currently serve as a Director, Recent Graduate on the Delaware Nurse Association, these roles deepened my understanding of governance, advocacy, and collaborative leadership. They expanded my perspective beyond individual performance to collective impact. Leadership became less about achievement and more about service.

Continuing the Climb: BSN and Academic Distinction

After earning my RN, I continued directly into the BSN program. Balancing employment, adjunct instruction responsibilities, student leadership roles, parenting, and coursework required structure and sacrifice. When I completed my BSN, I graduated summa cum laude, the highest academic distinction. That moment represented more than academic excellence. It symbolized transformation — from working nights while attending CNA classes, to standing as a nurse educator and leader graduating at the top of my class.

Education Without Debt: Removing Barriers

Through Pell Grant funding, institutional scholarships, and employee tuition reimbursement — including serving as a clinical adjunct instructor — I graduated from Delaware Technical Community College without student loan debt. Accessible education changes trajectories. Institutional support creates opportunity. My experience strengthened my commitment to mentorship and to expanding pathways for nontraditional nursing students.

The Path Toward Nursing Home Administration

Today, I am pursuing the pathway toward Nursing Home Administrator licensure. Having served as a CNA, LPN, RN, educator, and student leader, I carry a comprehensive understanding of healthcare delivery — from bedside realities to system-level

operations. Long-term care requires leaders who understand staffing challenges, regulatory compliance, workforce engagement, and quality improvement initiatives. Effective administrators must remain grounded in the lived experiences of front-line staff while navigating strategic oversight. My leadership philosophy is rooted in visibility, accountability, mentorship, and purposeful growth.

Representation and Responsibility

As former First Lady Michelle Obama stated, “There is no limit to what we, as women, can accomplish.” Her words echo the truth I have lived — that our beginnings do not define our ceilings. As a Jamaican immigrant, a mother, a Black woman and nurse leader, I understand the importance of representation in healthcare leadership. Visibility matters. When nurses from diverse backgrounds see someone who has navigated similar obstacles rise into leadership, it expands what feels possible. My children have witnessed every stage of this journey — the side jobs, the scholarships, the academic honors, the setbacks, and the victories. They have seen resilience not as theory, but as lived experience.

Leadership is not inherited. It is built — semester by semester, shift by shift, decision by decision. My journey from CNA to aspiring Nursing Home Administrator continues. What remains constant is the commitment I made in the NICU room — to rise, and to bring others with me. ■

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