

A Legacy of Service and Vision for ONA's Future

Jane Nelson, CAE



For the past 25 years, I have had the privilege of working alongside the Oklahoma Nurses Association Board and our dedicated members to advance nursing across our state. It has been an extraordinary journey—one filled with collaboration, growth, and a shared commitment to strengthening the profession we love. These years have passed quickly, but the impact of our collective work is lasting. Together, we have built meaningful opportunities for nurses to connect, learn, and advocate. Our annual convention and the Oklahoma Nurse publication continue to serve as cornerstones of professional engagement. Our membership has grown, and we have expanded our support for both new-to-practice nurses and experienced professionals. While there is still important work ahead, I am deeply proud of what we have accomplished as a community.

After thoughtful reflection, I have shared with the Board my intention to retire at the end of 2026. As part of this transition, the Board has identified Kristen Vencl as the next CEO/Executive Di-

rector. Many of you already know Kristen through her outstanding work as ONA's Event Manager over the past three and a half years. In the coming months, she will serve as CEO/Executive Director Designate, working closely with me to ensure a smooth and seamless leadership handoff.

As we prepare for this transition, one of my primary areas of focus is advancing modernization, inclusivity, and member engagement. Working with our members and the Board, we are defining what the next era of ONA should look like. Our goal is to build a financially vibrant, member-centered organization capable of adapting to rapid changes in healthcare, workforce trends, and the evolving needs of nurses. Additional updates will be shared through our electronic member newsletter and the House of Delegates as this work continues.

ONA—like nursing itself—is not one-size-fits-all. It represents nurses across every specialty, practice setting, and role. Each nurse contributes uniquely to the health and well-being of our communities. Our collective power grows when we

show up—not only for our patients, but for one another. Whether through membership, volunteering, advocacy, or leadership, involvement in ONA is an act of empowerment. It affirms that nurses deserve a seat at the tables where decisions are made and that our voices matter.

Participation in ONA strengthens our professional identity by creating opportunities for leadership development, education, mentorship, and connection across the full spectrum of nursing practice. When we support each other, we reinforce nursing as a trusted, respected, and essential profession—today and for generations to come.

As we look ahead, our shared mission remains clear: to advance all of nursing and ensure that nurses maintain their rightful place in shaping the future of healthcare. I remain fully committed to supporting this work and helping position ONA for continued success in the years to come. ■

What I Wish Someone Told Me My First Year as a Nurse

By: Elyssa Jones, BSN, RN, Emerging Nurse Director

My first code as a new graduate nurse brought on so many different emotions. Everything around me felt overwhelming, and in that moment, I remember feeling underqualified. At the same time, I also felt prepared because I had recognized that my patient was declining quickly and had time to call for help. I had help

at the bedside because I asked for it when things started to feel off. My supervisor immediately came to the bedside, along with two other nurses who had more experience than I did.

That experience taught me one of the most important things I wish someone had told me my first year: asking ques-

tions and asking for help does not make you a bad nurse. It makes you a safer one.

As a new nurse, it is easy to feel like you must prove yourself or look like you have it all together. The truth is, none of us know everything when we first start. Nursing school prepares you in many ways, but it cannot fully prepare you for the reality of

bedside nursing. Experience teaches you the workflow of your unit, what changes to watch closely, what is truly urgent, and how to trust your own judgment.

I also wish someone had told me that the emotional part of nursing can be just as hard as the clinical part. There will be days when you feel completely overwhelmed. There may be days when you get to your car after a shift and cry because everything finally catches up with you. It is okay to feel those emotions. It is okay to admit that a shift was hard. But it is also important not to carry it all alone. Talk to a trusted coworker, mentor, friend, or professional if those feelings become too heavy.

I wish someone had reminded me that the hard days are not the only days that matter. In the beginning, you may remember the emergencies, the mistakes you replay in your head, and the moments when you questioned yourself. But over time, you will also start to see your

wins. Maybe you caught a subtle change in your patient before it became something bigger. Maybe you advocated for your patient. Maybe you asked the right question. Maybe you made it through a difficult shift. Those moments matter, and you should be proud of them.

I wish someone had told me how much your environment matters. Supportive coworkers, managers, and preceptors can make a huge difference in your first year. Having people you trust and who make you feel supported, rather than alone, can be the difference between growing through your first year and burning out quickly.

I also wish someone had told me to take care of myself outside of work. During a shift, nurses spend so much time caring for everyone else. But when you are home, you matter too. Drink water. Eat well. Rest. Make time for the things that fill your cup, whether that is faith, family, exercise, reading, or simply quiet time. You

cannot continue to pour into others if you are running on empty.

Most of all, I wish someone had told me that confidence takes time. You will not become the nurse you want to be overnight, but you will grow with each shift, each question, and each patient. One day, a nurse newer than you will come to you for help, and you may surprise yourself when you know the answer. For any nurse in their first year, my advice is this: ask the questions, accept the help, give yourself grace, and celebrate the small wins. You are not expected to know everything right away. You are expected to keep learning, keep growing, and keep showing up.

Florence Nightingale said, "The most important practical lesson that can be given to nurses is to teach them what to observe — how to observe..." As new nurses, that is exactly what we are learning to do: observe, ask, grow, and trust ourselves a little more with each shift. ■

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Strengthening Professional Identity in Nursing

Dean Prentice, BSN, MA, DHA

Nursing has evolved significantly over the years, adapting to advances in healthcare, technology, and patient needs. Yet despite these changes, the profession remains rooted in a commitment to caring for others. As nursing leaders, we have an important responsibility not only to prepare nurses for practice, but also to cultivate a strong Professional Identity in Nursing (PIN).

Professional identity is more than a job title or clinical competency. It reflects how nurses see themselves within the profession and how they embody nursing's values, ethics, knowledge, and commitment to patient care. A strong professional identity influences decision-making, leadership, resilience, and professional engagement throughout a nurse's career.

Today's nurses enter practice during a time of unprecedented change. Staffing challenges, increasing patient complexity, and rapid healthcare transformation can make it difficult for new nurses to fully understand the depth and significance of the profession they have joined. Many are focused on mastering clinical skills and adapting to workplace demands, often leaving little opportunity to develop a deeper connection to nursing's purpose and professional values.

This challenge is particularly relevant as Generation Z continues to enter the workforce. Many seek meaningful work, opportunities for growth, and a sense of belonging. They want to understand not only what they do, but why it matters. Professional identity provides that connection, helping nurses see themselves as valued members of a profession that has a profound impact on individuals, families, and communities.

Nursing leaders play a critical role in fostering this development. Professional identity is strengthened through mentorship, coaching, role modeling, and intentional conversations about the purpose and values of nursing. Every interaction with a new nurse provides an opportunity to reinforce professional standards, encourage reflection, and connect daily tasks to the larger mission of healthcare.

When nurses develop a strong professional identity, they are more likely to demonstrate confidence, resilience, engagement, and commitment to the profession. They are better equipped to navigate challenges, advocate for patients, and grow into future leaders themselves.

As we address workforce challenges and prepare the next generation of nurses, professional identity formation must remain a priority. By intentionally investing in mentorship and professional development, nursing leaders can help cultivate a workforce that is not only clinically competent, but

also deeply connected to the values and purpose that define our profession.

The future of nursing depends not only on what nurses know, but on how strongly they identify with the profession they serve. ■



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