Graduating during a pandemic: Alumni talk about challenges and triumphs

The pandemic has uniquely challenged the OHSU School of Nursing classes of 2020 and 2021. We caught up with four alumni from the La Grande, Monmouth, and Portland campuses to ask them about their trials and triumphs since joining the nursing profession.

Amy Black, Bachelor’s with a major in Nursing ’20, R.N., found she needed to be resilient after finishing school online and then “jumping into the deep end” caring for critically ill patients in a medical/surgical ICU. She is proud of her ability to remain calm and share camaraderie with her colleagues. She feels blessed to be able to offer empathy and compassion to her patients. Black counseled on her parents’ side, calling them her heroes. She adds that Patsy Barfield, Ph.D., PMHNP-BC, Associate Dean, La Grande campus, “has gone the extra mile for me.”

As a pediatric RN, Leigh Richards, Bachelor’s with a major in Nursing ’21, admits that COVID-related staffing shortages have been a challenge. However, she is grateful when she hears “Oh good! You’re back again!” from her patients and their families. She adds that “it feels great to see kids get better.” Richards says her advocates have included her “incredibly supportive partner,” and her OHSU SoN classmates, “a crew of radical nurses.”

Adam Kinnard, Bachelor’s with a major in Nursing ’21, R.N., says that expectations did not necessarily match the reality of his work. He has struggled to adjust to the night shift at Alphonsus Regional Medical Center, Boise. Kinnard relies on his nurse friends who “bled the trail” before him and have listened and offered encouragement.

Leigh Richards, RN, Pediatric Nurse, Randall Children’s Hospital, Portland.

IN REMEMBRANCE

Born June 29, 1931, Beatrice Leola Cannon Gilmore was the first Black person to graduate from OHSU’s School of Nursing, a remarkable accomplishment on its own but even more impressive given she was one of the only married student in her class. She graduated in 1955, overcoming many barriers in seeking and achieving her goal of becoming a nurse. She is pictured in the Diversity Wall in the Kohler Pavilion. She died Dec. 29, 2021. She was 90 years old.

IN MEMORIAM

Maggie Soto, R.N., was a graduate of the OHSU School of Nursing Class of 1947. She died Dec. 29, 2021. She was 90 years old.
By Cathy Carroll

At the beginning of 2017, Rana Halabi Najjar, Ph.D., R.N., C.P.N.P., found herself in an unfamiliar situation as an educator. The School of Nursing had lost two students within three weeks of each other—one to depression and a second to complications around a chronic illness. It came amid broader challenges. In the wake of the 2016 election, students were fearful that their families might be deported.

“They were difficult weeks and months and I didn’t know how to respond to the trauma I was experiencing,” said Dr. Najjar. “It seemed like faculty were expected to be able to pick up the pieces and just keep going with business as normal but nothing about this experience felt normal. We worked hard to make sure students felt supported and got the help that they needed, but many of them struggled.”

Then, a friend who is a K-12 educator asked if she’d heard of trauma-informed education—a lens one to depression and a second to complications around a chronic illness. It came amid broader situation as an educator. The School of Nursing had lost two students within three weeks of each other.

By Cathy Carroll

Strides in diversity, equity and inclusion

Diverse avatars

Mike Coriasco, M.N.E., R.N., an instructor in the R.N.B.S. program, is using avatars to bring diversity into his online classes. Avatars, frequently illustrated characters, appear often in educational training programs. When Coriasco began using them in a course a couple of years ago, he found that it helped organize complex materials for students, and made the class more engaging.

At first, he used images of animals he had fostered in the past, two cats and a dog, as avatars, and each represented different aspects of the course work. For example, if the student saw information being delivered by a gray cat avatar named “Nip,” they knew it related to their term-length quality improvement project.

Coriasco said, “They knew immediately that this would be about the term project and I, as the instructor, didn’t need to call attention to that anymore.”

Coriasco worked with Jeff Jones, an educational technology specialist at OHSU, to explore more ways to use avatars. They realized it offered an opportunity to continue integrating diversity into Coriasco’s entry level Nursing 313 course.

Making the avatars members of marginalized communities can help share information from the perspective of a marginalized patient, for example, to discuss and present the impacts of health disparities, as well as increasing the visibility of members of marginalized groups within healthcare.

By selecting three illustrated avatars for Nursing 313: Jameela, a Muslim woman, William, a Black man, and Luna, a non-binary woman of unspecified ethnicity. Each has a role: Jameela points out helpful videos, William highlights important information, and Luna manages a fictional clinic, and offers ‘call’ students, to provide them with assignments.

“The challenge is that the faculty of nursing schools, in general, are overwhelmingly white,” Coriasco said. The larger goal of increasing faculty diversity takes time to achieve, beginning with addressing inequities in grades K through 12, which will help nursing in general become more diverse, and only then do those nurses go on to teach, often after years of experience. There is little Coriasco can do to directly influence those factors, and they will take years, of social change before we see a pronounced impact.

“By increasing visibility with the avatars, I can make my very small, but non-zero effort to help address the problem,” he said.

She immersed herself in reading about equitable teaching and grading practices. Dr. Najjar reached out to learning specialists from a range of departments at OHSU and in the fall of 2019, they began conceptualizing a strategy to collaboratively implement trauma-informed education at the university.

By Cathy Carroll

Rescuing primary care: OHSU gears up to meet demand

By Lee Lewis Hawk

Major American professional, educational and philanthropic groups are making a bold statement: Registered nurses (RNs) are poised to rescue primary care. It assumes that barriers in education, payment, nurse licensing and delivery structures can be broken down with new initiatives focused on meeting the country’s growing demand for primary care.

An influential conference sponsored by the Joseph Macy Jr Foundation at the behest of the American Academy of Nursing in 2016 concluded that the nation’s approximately 4 million RNs—the largest licensed health profession in the country—are key to closing the gap between the need for more primary care and the capacity to meet the need.

“One of our students was hired into a clinic that had never had an RN before. She was able to talk to the patients, help them quite smoking right away,” said Dr. Najjar.

Another need is to ensure that RNs working in primary care have the full scope of practice to practice as intended, and that the RNs have the opportunities to practice as intended.

“By increasing visibility with the avatars, I can make my very small, but non-zero effort to help address the problem,” he said.

Visit www.ohsufoundation.org/school-or-nursing/ohsu-nursing-noon to view the December OHSU Nursing@Noon seminar describing OPACT.