

Pitt Nurse

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH SCHOOL OF NURSING
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The **LEADERSHIP** Issue

Pitt Nursing Faculty and Alumni at the Forefront
of Service, Entrepreneurship and Administration

Pitt Nurse

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Please share information about your career achievements, advanced education, publications, presentations, honors received and appointments. We may include your news in the magazine or other media. Indicate names, dates and locations. Photos are welcome! **Send your updates to Emily Nunez at emn143@pitt.edu and Taylor Andrekanic at tva4@pitt.edu.**

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On the cover: Nursing leaders and Pitt Nursing alumni Tom Muscatello, John O'Donnell and Tamra Minnier. Photo by Rayni Shiring.



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Message from the Dean



Here at the University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing, we often say that we aren't just training nurses—we're preparing the next generation of nurse leaders.

And what does a nurse leader look like? It's a fair question, but it is difficult to put nurse leaders into a box. Their titles are diverse and their impact is far-reaching, driving innovation and quality improvements across health care. Pitt Nursing alumna and UPMC leader Tamra Minnier (BSN '84, MSN '85)—who graces the cover of this issue—perhaps put it best: “There isn't just one way to lead.”

In this issue, we highlight exceptional alumni and faculty members who are shaping the future of health care through entrepreneurship, service organizations and executive leadership roles. Their journeys are defined by a willingness to challenge themselves and a commitment to ensuring nurses have a seat at every decision-making table. These individuals are successful not in spite of their nursing background but because of the training, academic rigor and unique worldview that a nursing education instills.

A common thread throughout their stories is the power of mentorship—particularly the impact that Pitt Nursing faculty had on their career trajectories. We are proud that our faculty members take the time to recognize and nurture leadership potential in our students, connecting them with valuable opportunities and setting them up for success in their future careers. We believe this extra step is what separates a good nursing school from a great one.

As you peruse these pages and read about our incredible alumni, you may notice that this issue of Pitt Nurse magazine looks a little different. We have redesigned this publication to better reflect our values as a nursing school. The new look—polished and professional, with an emphasis on impact—includes dedicated sections to spotlight nurse scientists (page 16) and alumni voices (pages 30 and 35).

Since our last issue of Pitt Nurse magazine, we have had much to celebrate. In addition to being named a top 10 Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program in the nation by U.S. News & World Report, we recently honored our spring 2026 graduates. In May, one PhD student, eight DNP students, three Master of Science in Nursing students and 181 Bachelor of Science in Nursing students became Pitt Nursing alumni, launching the next chapter of their lives and careers.

Our graduates were fortunate to hear a poignant message from Pitt commencement speaker Leeanna McKibben, who serves as vice chancellor for administration and chief of staff for the health sciences, as well as the School of Medicine's vice dean for administration. McKibben started her career as a cardiac critical care nurse and took on roles of increasing responsibility, previously serving as the chief nursing officer and vice president of patient care at a 500-bed Level 1 trauma center and co-leading a 40-hospital Emergency Services Network.

In her speech, she urged graduates not to merely bounce back when encountering setbacks or challenges but to “bounce up.” “Bounce up by staying curious, by continuing to learn, by seeking better answers,” she said. “Bounce up by staying connected to your why, reaffirming why you chose this profession. Bounce up by staying courageous and resilient because you can do hard things.”

McKibben is a positive example of a nurse leader who never stopped learning and striving. Her advice undoubtedly resonates with the alumni featured in this issue, who have proven that nursing knows no limits. The many accomplishments of our nurse leaders are testaments to their character, their resilience and their passion for improving patient care and health care systems at the highest levels. I hope you will find their stories as inspiring as I do.

Christine E. Kasper, PhD, FAAN, FACS
Dean and Professor
University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing



Top Tier

The University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing is among the top 10 nursing graduate schools in the nation and the top 30 nursing programs in the world, according to rankings released by U.S. News & World Report and QS World University Rankings.

Pitt's Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program moved up three spots from last year and is now tied for No. 9 nationwide, according to U.S. News & World Report's 2026 list of Best Nursing Schools: Doctor of Nursing Practice.

"This ranking demonstrates our commitment to preparing the next generation of nursing leaders for productive and fulfilling careers in research, health care administration and other industries where highly qualified

nurses are needed," says Dean Christine E. Kasper. "We are extremely honored to learn that our peers regard our DNP program as highly as we do."

In addition to the overall DNP program rankings, Pitt Nursing's Nurse Anesthesia concentration is tied for No. 5 in the nation.

"Consistent with our longstanding history, the University of Pittsburgh Nurse Anesthesia program has remained in the top 10 since rankings were first introduced in 1998," says Kerry Quisenberry, former program director. "This recognition reflects the strength of our faculty, the caliber of our students and our continued commitment to excellence in nurse anesthesia education."

Pitt Nursing also ranks No. 28 in the world for nursing institutions, according to QS World University Rankings released in March 2026. The school climbed seven spots from last year and placed high in the research and discovery category, earning a 90.2 score for H-index citations, a scholarly metric that highlights the productivity and impact of faculty members' published papers.

This news follows earlier rankings that placed Pitt Nursing's Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program in the top 10. The BSN program currently ties for No. 8 in the nation, according to U.S. News & World Report rankings released in September 2025.

5th (tie)
in the nation



9th (tie)
in the nation



28th
in the world



BY THE NUMBERS

Pitt Day of Giving 2026

On Feb. 24, 2026, the 10th annual Pitt Day of Giving (PDoG) supported Pitt Nursing students by raising thousands of dollars for scholarship opportunities, cutting-edge learning experiences, essential resources and more. This is everything our generous community helped us achieve this year:

\$25,816.50

Total amount raised
for Pitt Nursing

182

Number of donors

22

Number of states
where donors live

4.6%

Increase in donor
participation from
previous year

Leading the Way

Learn more about five staff and faculty members in the School of Nursing who have recently accepted new leadership positions.

Amy Bowser

Assistant Dean for Academic Innovation, Instructional Design, Teaching, Evaluation and Learning Assessment



Since stepping into her new role in January 2026, Bowser has been focusing on educational quality, learning outcomes and instructional innovation. She continues to serve as an assistant professor and was previously the director of the Nursing Education Research and Scholarship HUB, providing key resources and support to faculty members and graduate students interested in nursing education and clinical research.

In addition to these roles, Bowser has evaluated Pitt Nursing programs, curricula and student learning outcomes to enhance nursing preparedness and maintain school accreditation. Her scholarship addresses nursing students' learning environments, which includes developing competency-based performance tools to assess student learning and creating innovative educational technology to support clinical training.

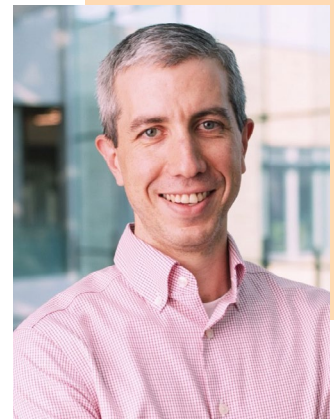
Kevin Dietrick

Senior Associate Dean for Strategic Operations

Dietrick was appointed as the School of Nursing's first senior associate dean for strategic operations in April 2026. He previously served as the associate dean for strategy, where he was instrumental in designing and launching new Pitt Nursing programs, conducting a comprehensive review of all graduate offerings, establishing the Clinical Management Office and overseeing internal and external communications, among other efforts to strategically position the school for the future.

Through rigorous data analysis and strategic planning, Dietrick has evaluated market trends, enrollment patterns and program outcomes to guide the development of Pitt Nursing programs that meet students' needs.

In his new role, Dietrick maintains his previous responsibilities while adding the oversight of administrative, financial, facilities and personnel activities.





Brayden Kameg (BSN '16, DNP '19)

Associate Dean for Graduate Clinical Education

As a Pitt Nursing associate professor and psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioner, Kameg channels her clinical expertise to make key leadership decisions on Pitt Nursing's Master of Science in Nursing and Doctor of Nursing Practice programs. Under her guidance, she previously restructured the Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner concentration to better address mental health needs, adding courses on addiction and adolescent psychiatry to the curriculum. Since stepping into her new role as an associate dean in August 2025, Kameg has played an instrumental role in working with faculty to review, revise and develop new majors, areas of concentration, certificates and minors at the graduate level.

John O'Donnell (MSN '91)

Senior Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning

A longtime Pitt Nursing professor and leader in nurse anesthesia, O'Donnell was named the School of Nursing's first senior associate dean for teaching and learning in July 2025. He previously served as chair of the Department of Nurse Anesthesia and director of the Nurse Anesthesia Program, and under his leadership, the program ranked among the nation's top five nurse anesthesia programs.

O'Donnell is also regarded as a pioneer in the field of simulation and nursing educational technology. In his role as a senior associate dean, he oversees continuing education and professional development; simulation activities; and international, online, nondegree and entrepreneurial programs.



Teresa Thomas (BSN '10, PhD '15)

Associate Dean for Research and Scholarship

An associate professor at Pitt Nursing, Thomas's research, teaching and service are dedicated to improving the health and well-being of individuals affected by cancer, serious illness and difficulties navigating the health care system.

She leads an undergraduate research mentoring program with the David C. Frederick Honors College and holds a leadership role with the Palliative Research Center at the University of Pittsburgh, as well as a faculty position at the Family CARE Center at UPMC Magee-Womens Hospital.

Since assuming her new role in August 2025, Thomas has developed and coordinated interdisciplinary collaborations and has elevated the impact and reputation of research programs within the School of Nursing.



IN THE KNOW

Continuing Professional Development

Pitt Nursing's Office of Continuing Education and Professional Development is one of only four university offices in Pennsylvania that has been designated an accredited provider by the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC).

The ANCC Accreditation Program identifies organizations worldwide that demonstrate excellence in Nursing Continuing Professional Development (NCPD). Accredited organizations use evidence-based ANCC criteria to plan, implement and evaluate the highest quality NCPD activities.

In the past year, the Office of Continuing Education and Professional Development has awarded more than 700 certificates and 1,000 hours of NCPD education activities.

Do you have a conference, meeting, club or activity for which you would like to provide NCPD hours? Email conted@pitt.edu for more information.

Retiring Sentiments

In 2025, Pitt Nursing celebrated the retirements of 10 accomplished faculty members. Leaving behind a legacy of rigorous research and clinical expertise, these educators influenced countless students and improved health outcomes across diverse populations. As they start the next chapter of their lives, they reflect on some of their favorite memories at Pitt Nursing.



Brenda Cassidy (MSNEd '86, MSN '97, DNP '11)

“My 17-year journey at the School of Nursing encompassed multiple roles as a graduate student, preceptor and faculty member. The school’s high standards in education, research and practice challenged me to grow in ways I never imagined and opened doors to unique professional opportunities. I’m deeply grateful for the support that allowed me to advance my expertise in adolescent health, champion improved outcomes for LGBTQIA+ youth, and mentor students and faculty to carry this important work forward.”

Denise Charron-Prochownik

“As faculty for more than 30 years, I was blessed with the best faculty and staff in the Department of Health Promotion and Development, superb administrative colleagues throughout the school and outstanding research teams! One of my greatest privileges has been collaborating with diverse populations—including Indigenous, Latina and African American communities—and promoting adolescent, women’s and maternal/child health to prevent diabetes and its complications. I thank all of you and Pitt for giving me this incredible opportunity.”



Laura Fennimore
(MSN '87, DNP '09)

“Pitt Nursing will always be a cherished professional home. It’s where I learned to nurture curiosity, hope and scholarship in nursing education,

practice and research—and where I thrived in the exchange of ideas with students, faculty and colleagues.”



Lisa Foertsch
(DNP '13)

“The student nurses at Pitt have been a delight to teach and to guide, both in clinical at UPMC Magee-Womens Hospital and in the Senior Seminar class.

One of my favorite messages as an educator is: “Think like a detective and put the patient picture together!”



Gerri Maurer

“As a graduate student, preceptor and ultimately a faculty member for nearly 22 years, my career has circled to include administrative, academic and practice components. I appreciate the recognition of both the Distinguished Clinical Scholar and the Dean’s Distinguished Teaching awards. I’m grateful for the support that allowed me to advance my expertise in academic education, conduct research, champion improved outcomes for students, and mentor students and faculty.”

Elizabeth Schlenk

“The University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing has outstanding faculty, staff and students with whom it was a pleasure to collaborate and teach. Being a member of the leadership team was an extremely rewarding experience. The school’s highly ranked undergraduate and graduate programs prepare the next generation of nurse clinicians, advanced practice nurses and administrators, and nurse scientists who make a difference through their compassionate, evidence-based, holistic care, transformative leadership and innovative research.”



Patricia Tuite (BSN '85, MSN '92)

“As a graduate of the School of Nursing, I was honored to return as a faculty member and later as director of the Doctor of Nursing Practice program. I have always loved nursing and serving as a clinical nurse specialist, and it was a privilege to see so many students go on to achieve greatness. I take comfort in knowing that our graduates are working tirelessly to apply the latest evidence to patient care, helping to improve patient outcomes across health care systems. I also have full confidence that our graduates will continue to help patients address a wide range of health challenges in a variety of health care settings.”



Additional retirees included (from left to right): **Alice Blazeck, LuAnn Sowko** and the late **Willa Doswell**, who is memorialized on page 31.

Lasting Legacy

In November 2025, Pitt Nursing established the **Sharon M. Connelly Endowed Memorial Scholarship in Nursing** to celebrate the life and legacy of an exceptional nurse, colleague and friend.

The scholarship will provide financial support for tuition and other education-related expenses to junior or senior students enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Nursing program within the School of Nursing. It is intended to recognize and encourage students who demonstrate the same dedication to compassionate care that Connelly exemplified throughout her 46-year nursing career. She specialized in medical-surgical care and pediatric rehabilitation and received numerous awards and accolades for her work.

The Sharon M. Connelly Endowed Memorial Scholarship in Nursing was established to honor her memory and inspire future generations of nurses to carry forward her values. Through this scholarship, Pitt Nursing hopes to empower students to pursue their calling with the same heart and dedication that Connelly brought to her work every day.



Men in Nursing Awards



Quinn Eckert (BSN '26) received a 2025 Outstanding Student Award at the American Association for Men in Nursing's annual conference in October 2025. For the fourth year running, Pitt Nursing was also recognized as one of the nation's top schools for recruiting, retaining and providing a supportive environment to male nursing students.

As former president of Pitt's Men in Nursing Club, Eckert helped make Pitt a top choice for male students looking to pursue nursing careers. Established in 2023, the student-led club hosts events for all nursing students and professionals to connect, share experiences and offer mentorship. Under Eckert's leadership, the group conducted outreach to make more male students feel welcomed at Pitt, including sending handwritten letters to incoming male students to invite them to join the Men in Nursing Club.

"Receiving this award demonstrates the steps we have made as a club to recruit and promote male nursing students," Eckert says, adding that the club had around 90 registered members under his leadership.

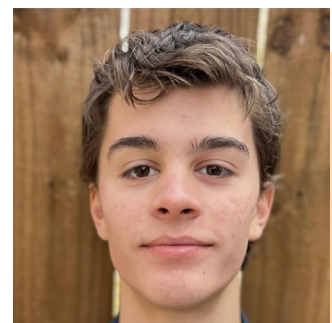
Nursing Foundation of Pennsylvania

Jules Nissley, a Bachelor of Science in Nursing student, earned a \$1,000 scholarship from the Nursing Foundation of Pennsylvania (NFP), an organization that provides financial support to qualified nursing students across the commonwealth. Nissley called it an honor to receive the organization's 2025 Alumni Association of the Former Albert Einstein Medical Center Nursing School of Philadelphia Scholarship.

"Beyond the financial assistance, which of course is extremely helpful, I felt a sense of pride to have my headshot put on NFP's website," Nissley says. "Their name carries weight, and to be associated with it even in this small way is a privilege."

While he is still weighing his options, Nissley says he's already thinking of pursuing a career in pediatric nursing.

"I've been working with kids for years, and it just means so much to me," he says. "Eventually, I'm planning on pursuing my Master of Science in Nursing to potentially work as a nurse practitioner. I'm very excited to explore career options through my clinicals at Pitt, and wherever I end up, I know I'll be prepared."





Pitt Nursing students—like Makayla Dixon (BSN '26), pictured here—have the opportunity to work in simulated clinical settings, enabling them to practice patient care in a low-risk environment.



Bachelor of Science in Nursing students Sarah Grabowy, Rachel Kam, Julia Nurthen and Lily Hirsch posed for a picture in Lucerne while participating in Pitt's Health Care Delivery in Switzerland program.

Prestigious Study Abroad Scholarships

Three Bachelor of Science in Nursing students received Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarships to study abroad in May 2026. **Fatima Fall, Rachel Kam** and **Riley Moss** are recipients of this merit-based scholarship from the U.S. Department of State, which supports study experiences and internships in more than 170 countries.

They are among the eight Pitt undergraduates who received a Gilman scholarship for the October 2025 application cycle—an impressive feat, according to Lynnea Lombardi, Pitt Nursing's program manager for global programs.

"Fatima, Rachel and Riley's selection out of a historically large pool of applicants speaks to their forward-thinking vision for global perspectives of nursing," Lombardi said.

Their global experiences include health care site visits, nursing lessons, networking opportunities and cultural outings.

"It's once-in-a-lifetime to study abroad in college, and I would not be able to go abroad without this scholarship," says Fall, who chose China as her destination for a two-week educational excursion.

On selecting Switzerland, Kam remarks, "I've always wanted to go because it has a really pretty landscape, but I also think that getting experience outside of the United States is great."

To gain a new perspective of nursing, Moss opted for a program in Argentina that explores the business of health care.



From left to right, Anna Lao (a spring 2025 Gilman scholarship recipient), Rachel Kam, Riley Moss and Fatima Fall were honored at a scholarship celebration in April 2026.

"I liked that it's a mix of nursing and business students," Moss says. "I'm interested in the crossover between health care and health care management."

The Gilman scholarship program provides funding on an annual basis. Nursing students who are interested in learning more can contact Lynnea Lombardi at lel164@pitt.edu.

Nursing Research Award Winners



Myeong-ga Cho

Pitt Nursing Associate Professor **Jill Demirci** (BSN '05, MSN '10, PhD '12) and PhD student **Myeong-ga Cho** are among the 2026 winners of the Eastern Nursing Research Society (ENRS) awards.

Demirci won the ENRS Mid-Career Research Award for her studies on human lactation and breastfeeding challenges. She researches the psychological, behavioral and physiological roots of low breast milk supply, as well as interventions to support the uptake, duration and intensity of breastfeeding. She is also developing a data-driven platform called Milk Match that would connect mothers with surplus milk to those who don't have enough or are unable to breastfeed, including adoptive and surrogate families.

Demirci calls the ENRS award an "honor," stressing that it highlights the value of rigorous, nursing-driven science.

"This recognition reflects the extraordinary mentorship I've received from brilliant women throughout my career, the generosity of colleagues and collaborators, and the trust of families who have participated in our research," she says.

Cho, who earned the 2026 Dissertation Award, echoed similar sentiments. "Winning this award is both an honor and a meaningful affirmation of my research program," she says.

Cho explores biological, behavioral and socioeconomic factors to explain why aerobic exercise helps offset cognitive decline in some women with breast cancer but is less effective in others. To account for these differences, she is evaluating epigenetic changes—molecular modifications to DNA—to identify biological signatures of vulnerability and resilience in study participants. These insights could help health care professionals develop personalized treatment plans and more readily identify women at risk of developing cancer-related cognitive decline.



Jill Demirci



Spotlighting Pitt Nursing Creativity



Jennifer Fellows

The Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing honored two members of Pitt Nursing at its biennial convention in November 2025.

Director of Operations and Communications **Jennifer Fellows** and Associate Professor of Nurse Anesthesia **Joseph Goode** (BSN '97, MSN '00, PhD '18) received International Awards for Nursing Excellence in recognition of their creativity and innovation.

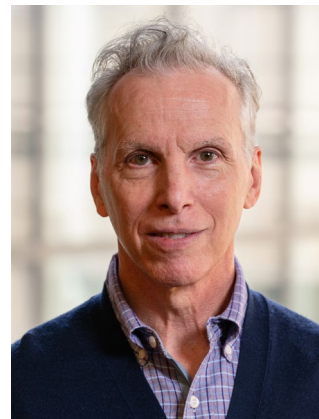
Fellows earned the Creative Communications Award, which recognizes individuals “who pursue excellence in communicating nursing’s rich and diverse stories.” She has played an instrumental role in making Pitt Nursing nationally known for its highly ranked programs, rigorous research and award-winning faculty.

“As a marketing professional, I have the deepest appreciation for the incredible things a nurse accomplishes, from excelling in the clinical setting and leading in the boardroom to pioneering research that will shape the future of health care,” Fellows says. “Nurses are amazing.”

Goode earned the Edith Moore Copeland Award for Excellence in Creativity and Innovation, which recognizes innovative collaborations, technologies and other creative pursuits that positively advance the field of nursing.

Also vice chair for research and scholarship in the Department of Nurse Anesthesia, Goode has spearheaded simulation-based education materials to teach critical skills to Pitt Nursing students. He has been at the forefront of health care simulation education for 25 years and previously received a nearly \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Air Force to implement a simulation-based education program to prevent back injuries in nurses.

“It is an incredible honor,” Goode says of receiving the award. “It is really a positive reflection of all the supportive mentors and colleagues, as well as the students, that I have worked with during my career.”



Joseph Goode

Faculty Inducted into Prestigious Nursing Organizations

Several professional organizations—including the American Academy of Nursing (AAN), American Association of Nurse Practitioners (AANP) and American College of Critical Care Medicine (ACCM)—have accepted Pitt Nursing faculty members into their prestigious fellowship societies over the last year.

Induction into these programs represents a significant milestone in a nurse’s career, demonstrating career-spanning achievements in research, academia and clinical excellence. Congratulations to the following new Pitt Nursing inductees:

Sheila Alexander (BSN '89, PhD '04)

*Associate Professor and Chair
2025 AAN Fellow*

Elizabeth Crago

*Associate Professor
2026 ACCM Fellow*

Young Ji Lee

*Health and Community Systems Vice Chair for
Administration and Associate Professor
2025 AAN Fellow*

Brayden Kameg (BSN '16, DNP '19)

*Associate Dean for Graduate Clinical Education
and Assistant Professor
2025 AAN Fellow and 2026 AANP Fellow*

Tracey Robertson Bell

*Health Promotion and Development Vice Chair for
Administration and Associate Professor
2026 AANP Fellow*

Teresa Thomas (BSN '10, PhD '15)

*Associate Dean for Research and Scholarship
and Associate Professor
2025 AAN Fellow*

Judith Zedreck Gonzalez (BSN '79, DNP '13)

*Professor and Health Systems Executive Leadership
DNP Program Coordinator
2025 AAN Fellow*

Join our faculty!

nursing.pitt.edu



The University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing has a variety of job openings, including key leadership roles in the Department of Nurse Anesthesia: a department chair and a vice chair for administration. Part- and full-time faculty positions are available in a variety of specialty areas, including community health, medical/surgical, obstetric, pediatric and psychiatric/mental health.

Learn more:



University of
Pittsburgh®

Health Sciences
School of Nursing



Granted

The following Pitt Nursing faculty members were awarded grants between August 2025 and February 2026.

Jill Demirci received the Pitt Un-Challenge Award and the Pitt Momentum Funds Teaming Grant for her work on “Milk Match: Developing a Data-Driven Solution for Safe and Optimal Human Milk Sharing.”

Andrew Dierkes received the Pitt Momentum Funds Priming Grant for his work on data-driven allocation of scarce nursing resources to improve patient outcomes. He also received a grant through Pitt Health Sciences’ Competitive Medical Research Fund to evaluate the role of nurse-patient assignments in SEP-1 compliance and septic patient mortality.

Richard Henker received Pitt’s John C. Mascaro Faculty Fellowship in Sustainability for his work on ultrasound guided regional anesthesia education in Laos.

Brayden Kameg received a grant through the American Public Health Association for her work on “Gender Differences in the Association Between Substance Use and Death by Suicide Among Military Veterans.”

Heeyoung Lee received a Pitt Momentum Funds Priming Grant for her research on open-label, flexible-dose, adjunctive bromocriptine for patients with schizophrenia and metabolic dysfunction.

Margaret Rosenzweig received a grant through the Magee-Womens Research Institute and Foundation for “Wholistic Support of Triple Negative Breast Cancer Patients.” She also received a Pitt Un-Challenge Award for the Cancer Advocacy, Resources, and Equity (CARE) Navigation Partnership. Additionally, she received the Hillman Cancer Center Developmental Pilot Program Team Science Award for her work, “PITT CARE Center: Pittsburgh Initiative to Transform Cancer Access, Resources, and Equity.”

Beth Shaaban received a Pitt Un-Challenge Award for her work, “PSMArt: Passive Smartphone Monitoring for early ADRD detection.” ■



Taming the “Wild West” of Women’s Health

By Mike Yeomans

*Office of Innovation and Entrepreneurship
University of Pittsburgh*



As a freshly minted nurse from the University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing, Jill Demirci’s career began in 2005, a few blocks from campus at UPMC Magee-Womens Hospital, providing postpartum care to new mothers.

“I was excited to help new moms and parents, but many struggled mightily with breastfeeding, and we did not receive much training on lactation,” she says.

As she did her best to support her patients, she became fascinated by human milk as an “evolutionarily perfect” system for the health of mothers and babies alike, so much so that she returned to Pitt to complete her master’s and doctoral degrees with a research focus on clinical and behavioral interventions for improved breastfeeding.

“There is so much we need to do to support new parents. The state of science in women’s health is so far behind when it comes to evidence-based protocols. It’s like the wild west,” she says, in comparison to most other areas in health care.

After completing her postdoctoral studies at Pitt’s Department of Pediatrics, she joined the faculty as an associate professor of health promotion and development at the School of Nursing, where she also serves as the director of the Maternal/Perinatal and Reproductive Health Research Hub. Among other things, her research has explored solutions to address the interplay of psychological, behavioral and physiological reasons for low milk supply.

As her career in academia progressed, she realized that unless she took action to implement some of the ideas coming

from her research, they might not have the impact that she wanted to achieve.

“I’m good at research. I can write a solid grant proposal. At the end of my life, however, what will be the worthwhile thing that I would want to leave behind? For me, that will be to have optimized the way care for new parents and families is delivered on a wide scale,” she says.

Building a Better System

A new opportunity arose last year that catalyzed her action. She applied for a fellowship through the Pitt Empowering Innovation, Incubation and Impact (EI3) program offered through the Innovation Institute, part of the Office of Innovation and Entrepreneurship.

The fellowship has allowed her to direct 15% of her time to exploring

“We want to understand how we can create the most useful system, and interviews with ecosystem stakeholders and potential partners will help ensure we don’t duplicate or interfere with existing services that are working well.”

— **Jill Demirci**
(BSN '05, MSN '10, PhD '12)



innovation and entrepreneurship and begin testing some of the interventions from her research under the guidance of professional mentors.

“I came to the EI3 program thinking about how we can innovate and improve the experience for families and parents and to create a medical home for postpartum parents who want to breastfeed and need help navigating challenges,” she says.

Her first initiative is developing a medical record and health portal system integration to safely and efficiently match mothers with surplus milk to those with insufficient supply or who may be unable to breastfeed, including adoptive and surrogate families. Demirci says her goal with this program, which she calls Milk Match, is to provide women ineligible for pasteurized donor milk from milk banks with access to infant feeding alternatives beyond formula.

This project received a grant from Pitt’s Clinical and Translational Science Institute through its Un-Challenge Funds and has most recently gained additional support through Pitt Momentum Funds.

She says her new funding will allow her to conduct problem validation with potential end-user parents and clinicians, build the match algorithm

and milk delivery system and develop a business plan to test the system.

“We want to understand how we can create the most useful system, and interviews with ecosystem stakeholders and potential partners will help ensure we don’t duplicate or interfere with existing services that are working well,” she says.

She is also seeking regulatory guidance to ensure the program meets safety and ethical standards. If it is successful in Pittsburgh, she would look to market the program to scale it to other health systems outside the region.

Even as she gets this program off the ground, Demirci has set her sights higher. She is exploring the creation of a center at the School of Nursing that would provide families with a full scope of lactation care with wraparound breastfeeding-adjacent services and specialty care provided in-house or by partners. Services could include maternal mental health, doula care and peer support, social support resources and specialty services like infant speech-language pathology, physical therapy and craniosacral therapy. The center would also have a complementary focus on research and innovation that addresses common and intractable breastfeeding problems experienced by families.

“I am envisioning a resource to serve the local community, accelerate research innovation in the lactation space and serve as a model for nurse- and community-led clinical and research innovation for maternal health that can be duplicated in other places,” she says.

While still in the early stages, Demirci says she has found encouragement from the School of Nursing leadership, including Dean Kasper and Senior Associate Dean for Research and Scholarship Yvette Conley, who recognizes the potential impact of such a resource on families and on Pitt’s role in maternal-child health innovation.

Leaning into Pitt’s Innovation Ecosystem

Demirci says that even as her innovation fellowship winds down through its second and final year of support, she continues to lean on Innovation Institute staff and mentors.

“I can call or text them whenever I’m navigating some new area that I’m not trained in, and they will always make time for me,” she says. She pointed out that when she was preparing to apply for the Momentum Funds grant, she met with her mentors at least 10 times as she refined her presentation pitch.

“I’m so grateful to people like Peter Allen and John Inserra from the Innovation Institute and my mentor, Maura Rosenfeld,” she says. “They are so giving of their time and expertise and genuinely excited to help researchers like me launch into the innovation and commercialization space.”

Demirci is now conducting market analysis for the Milk Match system, including conducting interviews and focus groups with families, care providers and community leaders. For the breastfeeding research, innovation and clinical support center, she is developing initial funding strategies to support and sustain each focus area and exploring potential space options. ■



In Good Company

Three Nurse Entrepreneurs Redefining Their Field

By Emily Nunez

Nurses are natural problem-solvers, communicators and risk navigators—the same skills needed to build a successful business. While hospitals are still the profession’s primary hub, a growing number of graduates from the University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing are becoming their own bosses.

Meet three alumni who transformed their nursing expertise into health care businesses. One founded her own children’s and women’s health consulting firm, another launched a nurse-focused recruiting agency and a third is expanding his family-owned anesthesia business. Each took a unique path to entrepreneurship, but all credited Pitt Nursing with helping them get there.

Driving More Dollars to Women’s Health

When **Vicki Lucas (BSN ’77, MNEd ’79)** was a third-year nursing student at Pitt, she started an obstetrics clinical rotation at UPMC Magee-Womens Hospital and was struck with a sense of clarity.

“I knew that was my life’s work immediately,” Lucas says. “It just came so easily and naturally—the anatomy, the physiology, the miracle of birth. It made such beautiful sense to me.”

Her intuition proved right. She went on to become a women’s health care nurse practitioner and ultimately founded her own health consulting firm focused on women’s and children’s health: Vicki Lucas, LLC.

For Lucas, entrepreneurship wasn’t always the end goal, though. She knew she wanted to get certified as a nurse practitioner, and at one point she also considered becoming a college dean. After earning her bachelor’s in nursing, she enrolled in Pitt’s graduate-level nursing education program.

“What Pitt taught me, in both my bachelor’s and my master’s, was to use the nursing process as a way of thinking,” she says. “It taught me a problem-solving methodology, which is something I still use today.”



“Through word of mouth, people found out that I was available to pop in and do strategic planning or revenue enhancement or improve operations flow—whatever it may be.”

—Vicki Lucas

Lucas went on to earn her PhD in health care administration and finance from the University of Texas (UT) at Austin and landed a job in university administration, ultimately launching a nurse practitioner program at UT Houston and chairing one of the first national conferences on women’s health nursing.

Later, she started the first women’s health service line for the Memorial Hermann Health System, one of the biggest systems of its kind in Southeast Texas. She then served as the first vice president of women’s and children’s services at MedStar Health, developing a division that oversaw \$550 million in revenue.

Over the course of her career, she learned that she enjoyed crunching numbers and finding innovative ways to help health systems cut costs. Those funds could then be redirected to services that benefit patients, from pelvic health centers to women’s heart programs. When Lucas started consulting on the side, she realized it was the perfect way to help a larger slice of the market.

“I loved being able to come in as an objective outsider and make significant improvements,” she says. “Through word of mouth, people found out that I

was available to pop in and do strategic planning or revenue enhancement or improve operations flow—whatever it may be.”

She decided to go independent in 2005, launching her own consulting firm and “never looking back,” she says. As a staff of one, she has worked with more than 250 clients around the world, including major hospitals, medical centers and health systems. She has helped architects design health facilities around the country and beyond—

including a women’s hospital in Doha, Qatar—and thrives on bringing together stakeholders to solve problems.

Lucas says if there’s any advice she could give to nurses and aspiring nurse leaders, it’s to reframe the way they think about finance.

“A lot of times, nurses and clinical folks think that finances are dirty, and they don’t really want to be part of it,” she says. “But you’ve got to be a part of it in order to develop a return on investment

that is going to sell your idea or show why a service should be invested in.”

By blending her clinical expertise and business acumen, Lucas has been able to make a real-world difference in the lives of women and children.

“The thing I’m most proud of is that I feel I’ve made a significant impact in women’s and children’s health by improving access to care and quality of care,” she says, “and I’ve done it by driving the financials.”

Connecting Nurses to New Opportunities

Tom Muscatello (BSN ’95) took an early interest in the medical field. By the time he was old enough to enroll at Pitt Nursing, he was still figuring out his career goals but had a hunch he was on the right path.

“I wasn’t really sure what I wanted to be—a doctor or nurse—but felt that nursing was the best start,” he says. “I could move on to something else if it didn’t work out.”

Fortunately for Muscatello, he didn’t need to hatch a backup plan. Just three years after earning his bachelor’s degree from Pitt Nursing, he leveraged his knowledge of the industry to launch his own health care recruiting agency. As the founder and CEO of STAT Staffing Medical Services, Muscatello helps to fill more than 150 health care positions each week.

His business is predicated on a mutually beneficial model: pairing medical professionals with meaningful work and helping facilities overcome staff shortages. Muscatello explained that STAT Staffing’s tagline—“the Boy Scouts of health care recruiting”—means they’re prepared for any request.

By focusing on western Pennsylvania, STAT Staffing can get to know prospective employees and employers on a deeper level than national agencies, Muscatello says. His agency provides personalized recommendations on both sides, whether it’s a nurse looking for flexible work or a hospital seeking staff with specific qualifications.



“Sometimes we get positions that we think nurses are a good fit for, and they don’t even realize they have the experience to do it. It changes their whole lives.”

—Tom Muscatello

“We really try to find the right person for the position, not just the person who’s available,” Muscatello says. “Sometimes we get positions that we think nurses are a good fit for, and they don’t even realize they have the experience to do it. It changes their whole lives.”

Muscatello also matches nurses with unconventional roles, including health care software trainers for tech companies. Reflecting on the roots of his career, Muscatello says he first learned that nurses could pursue nontraditional career paths while at Pitt. He recalls taking a class that brought in nursing entrepreneurs, including one with a particularly memorable job.

“There was a nurse that came in who worked for an architecture firm and helped design different hospitals, and I thought, ‘Wow, there are so many different things you can do with a nursing degree that no one really knows about,’” he says.

Since launching his company in 1998, Muscatello has hired a “lean and mean” team of seven. They primarily pair nurses with jobs but also work with respiratory therapists and other health care professionals. On the employer side, they work with facilities both big and small, from hospitals to schools to flu clinics.

While the ongoing national nursing shortage has presented both challenges and opportunities for STAT Staffing, Muscatello says its success boils down to a simple formula: building strong relationships with clients and continuing to deliver results year after year.

“I’m proud of our reputation,” he says. “We’ve been in business for 27 years, and some of our clients have been with us since day one. That means a lot to me.”

Carrying on a Family Legacy

As the son of two nurse anesthetists, **Robert Wrobleski (MSN '17)** had an “inkling” he’d end up in the medical field but wasn’t sure he’d follow in his parents’ footsteps. After a period of exploration, though, all signs pointed to a future in anesthesia.

“As I started looking into different options in medicine and dentistry and chiropractic, I got led back into the anesthesia field,” he says. “I just loved the operating room and the environment.”

Initially interested in business, Wrobleski is an accounting and business administration graduate who went on to earn another bachelor’s degree in nursing through an accelerated program. He then enrolled in Pitt’s graduate-level nurse anesthesia program, citing its strong national rankings and diverse clinical experiences.

“Pitt’s program is unique because it is affiliated with such a strong health system and world-renowned specialties in cardiac, obstetrics and pediatrics,” he says. “Most of the programs around the country have to scramble to get those experiences for students.”

After earning his master’s degree, he spent three years working as a nurse anesthetist at AHN Allegheny General Hospital before joining BPW Medical Associates, the full-service anesthesia company his parents founded.

“It started at the first independent surgery center in Pennsylvania and grew to three other centers prior to me joining,” Wrobleski says. “Once I joined, I took on a leadership role on the financial, management and contracting side and helped to grow our business.”

BPW Medical Associates employs around 50 anesthesia providers—primarily nurse anesthetists—and deploys them to medical facilities around Southwestern Pennsylvania. Over the years, BPW has become the exclusive supplier of anesthesia services to two hospitals, six surgery centers and a variety of office-based practices.

Wrobleski is now the company’s vice president but continues to practice the craft that attracted him to nursing in the first place.



“In anesthesia, there are options to work for large health systems or small to medium groups like ours. Through the experience offered at the University of Pittsburgh, you can be adequately trained to do either.”

—Robert Wrobleski

“I’m in the operating room five days a week,” he says, “and after I’m done, I handle the business side.”

Wrobleski explained that BPW is filling a major gap in the health care industry, especially as anesthesiologists and certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNAs) retire without younger workers available to take their places. His company has also seen a higher demand for anesthesia beyond operating rooms.

“There are projections of a massive shortage of anesthesia providers in the next decade or so,” Wrobleski says. “There has also been a bigger need for anesthesia services in areas that typically did not require them in the past, such as MRI scans, CT scans and interventional radiology. All those areas are now vying for the same limited pool of anesthesia resources.”

Wrobleski recalls a global experience at Pitt that helped to prepare him for such scenarios. During a trip to Cambodia that was led by Professor Richard Henker, Wrobleski saw how medical professionals overcame barriers to provide pediatric anesthesia.

“It showed that there are a lot of different ways to provide anesthesia with limited resources and monitoring equipment,” he says. “You have to be efficient with the drugs and supplies you’re using, and you have to be willing to go with the flow.”

Wrobleski says this lesson has come in handy while confronting shortages and supply chain issues, all while striving to offer anesthesia services in a safe and cost-effective manner. While he has loved working for a regional business, he said the possibilities are limitless for aspiring nurse anesthetists.

“In anesthesia, there are options to work for large health systems or small to medium groups like ours,” he says. “Through the experience offered at the University of Pittsburgh, you can be adequately trained to do either.”

It’s Possible at Pitt

By advocating for women’s health services, connecting nurses to life-changing opportunities and providing safe access to anesthesia, Lucas, Muscatello and Wrobleski are redefining their profession.

They are proof you don’t have to choose between helping people or building a successful business; you can do both. ■



Leading Through Service

By Katelyn Kocis

Leadership in nursing does not always begin with a title. More often, it starts with a willingness to serve—on a committee, within a professional organization or alongside colleagues who see gaps and believe nurses belong at the tables where decisions are made. For three University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing alumni, service has been the throughline of careers that now span local, national and international influence. **Jennifer Adamski (MSN '02)**, **Taryn Edwards (BSN '04)** and **John O'Donnell (MSN '91)** each followed different paths, but all were shaped by Pitt's emphasis on critical thinking, professional responsibility and the belief that leadership is a natural extension of nursing practice.

Championing Critical Care Nursing

Jennifer Adamski's career began where many nurses find their professional identity—at the bedside. A Pittsburgh native, she stepped directly into critical care after earning her credentials.

"I walked out of nursing school into an ICU and have never left," she says. "Critical care is where I learned how important teamwork, communication and trust really are."



"You're going to be uncomfortable until you're comfortable—and then it's time to get uncomfortable again. That's where growth happens."

Jennifer Adamski

From ICUs across Western Pennsylvania to nationally recognized trauma centers, Adamski built a career grounded in high-acuity clinical practice before advancing her education through Carlow University and the University of Pittsburgh's Acute and Critical Care Nurse Practitioner program. That strong clinical foundation, she believes, has been essential to her effectiveness as a leader.

Adamski's leadership journey was not carefully mapped. Instead, it grew organically from practice. Early mentors—whom she prefers to call "champions"—encouraged her to speak up, join committees and step into roles that initially felt uncomfortable.

"You're going to be uncomfortable until you're comfortable—and then it's time to get uncomfortable again," she says. "That's where growth happens."

Through service, Adamski gained insight into how health care systems function and how nurses often identify safety gaps and opportunities for improvement

long before others do. That mindset ultimately carried her to national leadership. Adamski recently completed her term as president of the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN), representing more than 135,000 members, and now serves as immediate past president.

"Leadership is not about the title," Adamski says. "It's about stewardship—about being responsible for something bigger than yourself and leaving it better than you found it."

Her tenure emphasized advocacy, professional value and what she calls "the courage to soar"—a message that nurses can lead from anywhere, including the bedside. In addition to her AACN roles, Adamski has served on numerous national committees across nursing and critical care organizations, contributed to trauma and critical care education, and represented advanced practice registered nurses on the Georgia Board of Nursing.

Throughout it all, Adamski has remained deeply committed to mentoring students and early-career nurses, urging them to connect with professional organizations early.

"Getting a job is who you know; keeping a job is what you know," she recalls being told as a Pitt student. "Professional organizations are where you learn, grow and find your people."

For Adamski, Pitt played a pivotal role in shaping her leadership philosophy. The School of Nursing instilled clinical excellence, critical thinking and a sense of professional accountability that normalized leadership as part of nursing identity. Today, she sees her national and international work as both an extension of that foundation and a responsibility to pay forward what she learned.

A National Voice for Neonatal Nurses

Taryn Edwards knew early that nursing—and leadership—would be part of her future. She applied to one nursing school, fell in love with Pitt almost immediately and by her sophomore year had set her sights on neonatal nursing.

"I knew I wanted to take care of the most vulnerable patients," Edwards says.

"Neonatal nurses are a rare breed—we care for the smallest, sickest babies, and that stays with you forever."

Inspired by faculty who emphasized that nurses must "lead the charge," Edwards joined the National Association of Neonatal Nurses (NANN) while still a student—an early decision that would shape her career.

After graduating in 2004, Edwards began her career at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, where she found her passion caring for critically ill newborns, specifically infants in their first 28 days of life. She later earned a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania and transitioned into neonatal nurse practitioner practice, focusing on surgical and high-risk infants. In 2021, she joined Nemours Children's Health, Delaware, continuing her clinical work alongside an increasingly significant leadership role.



"If nurses don't speak up, someone else will speak for us, and they won't always get it right."

Taryn Edwards

Edwards' service trajectory followed a steady, intentional path from local chapter involvement to national governance. She served as newsletter editor and president for NANN's Delaware Valley chapter before being elected to its national board of directors in 2015. After additional service on NANN's Advanced Practice Council, she was elected president, becoming the youngest president in the organization's history.

"Balancing this role alongside full-time clinical work is demanding," Edwards says, "but it is a true honor to have a seat at the table and to represent neonatal nurses across the country."

As president, Edwards has prioritized advocacy and legislative engagement, emphasizing that bedside care is only one piece of nursing's broader impact. Under her leadership, NANN has signed on to dozens of federal advocacy letters addressing toxic environmental exposures, maternal and infant health data collection and nursing education funding.

"If nurses don't speak up, someone else will speak for us," she says. "And they won't always get it right."

Leading a national organization that represents neonatal nurses across diverse settings and generations comes with challenges. Edwards has focused on workforce shortages recruitment into neonatal nursing and ensuring educational resources meet the needs of four generations of nurses. She believes technology will play a key role, with nurses leading innovation and shaping how it is integrated into care.

For Edwards, service leadership fulfills a deeply personal goal: "I wanted to be able to say that I contributed to something larger than myself," she says.

Her advice to Pitt students and alumni is simple: Get involved, find mentors and don't wait until you feel ready. Leadership, she insists, is both achievable and necessary—and Pitt nurses are prepared for it.

Behind-the-Scenes Leadership

John O'Donnell's influence on nursing may be less visible to the public, but it is foundational to the profession's infrastructure. Recently appointed Pitt Nursing's first senior associate dean for teaching and learning, O'Donnell has spent decades leading through education, accreditation and governance.

"I've always been more comfortable behind the scenes," O'Donnell says. "But leadership doesn't always mean being out front—it means making sure the systems that support nurses actually work."

Over the course of his career, O'Donnell has shaped nurse anesthesia education nationally and internationally. As a longtime program director and department chair, he guided Pitt's Nurse Anesthesia program to national



"Say yes when the opportunity comes, even when it's scary."

John O'Donnell

prominence, earning top rankings and recognition for innovation in simulation and curriculum design.

Service has been a constant throughout his career. O'Donnell served on the Pennsylvania State Board of Nursing, helping shape policy, disciplinary processes and public protection efforts. Nationally, he held multiple leadership roles within the Society for Simulation in Healthcare, including treasurer during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Those were hard decisions but necessary ones," he says. "We had to protect the organization so it could continue serving educators and learners long after the crisis passed."

Perhaps most influential has been his work in accreditation. O'Donnell rose through the ranks of the Council on Accreditation of Nurse Anesthesia Educational Programs (COA), ultimately serving as president. During his tenure, he helped modernize accreditation standards to better reflect contemporary clinical practice.

"As president, I opened up the COA practice doctorate education standards for review and revision—earlier in the process than normal—so we could keep pace with evolving clinical practice," he notes, adding that revisions to standards went into effect Jan. 1, 2026.

His impact extends to simulation education. He is senior associate director and cochair of the research committee at the Winter Institute for Simulation Education (WISER) in Pittsburgh and helped develop the iSIM (Improving Simulation Instructional Methods) course—widely regarded as the most-taught faculty development course in simulation worldwide—as well as the GAS Debriefing model.

The GAS model (Gather, Analyze, Summarize) is a structured approach used after simulation exercises to guide discussion, reflection and learning. It was adopted into the American Heart Association Core Curriculum for Advanced Cardiovascular Life Support and Pediatric Advanced Life Support. O'Donnell explains that effective debriefing is essential for translating simulation training into real-world improvements in patient safety.

His international work includes helping establish or elevate simulation centers worldwide—from Vietnam to Taiwan to China—because, he believes, "collaboration and friendship grow when people share a common goal: improving the quality of education and patient safety."

O'Donnell initially did not envision himself as a leader. That shift came later, influenced by military service as a U.S. Army officer and by recognizing his strengths in facilitation and education. His advice to students and alumni mirrors that realization.

"If you want to lead, you have to say yes," he advises, describing leadership as a practice of stepping into opportunities even when they feel daunting.

He also encourages younger leaders to define themselves.

"There are no limits to that. You decide what you want to do," he says. "Say yes when the opportunity comes, even when it's scary."

Continuing a Commitment to Service

Though their paths differ, Adamski, Edwards and O'Donnell embody a shared Pitt Nursing legacy: leadership rooted in service, mentorship and a commitment to advancing the profession. Their stories illustrate that leadership is not confined to executive offices or national stages—it emerges wherever nurses choose to engage, advocate and serve.

For current students and alumni considering their own next steps, their message is clear. Leadership is not reserved for a select few. It is a responsibility—and an opportunity—that begins with saying yes. ■

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From Bedside to Boardroom

Pitt Nursing alumni are at the helm of health care

By Katelyn Kocis



Leadership in nursing often begins at the bedside. For many nurses, however, it evolves into something broader: shaping systems, guiding strategy and influencing care far beyond a single unit. For four University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing alumnae, leadership has meant stepping into complex administrative roles where nursing voices help steer health systems across the country.

From workforce innovation and quality improvement to executive strategy and systemwide nursing practice, the work undertaken by these individuals exemplifies how Pitt Nursing prepares graduates not only to lead teams but to spark transformation.

Excelling Across Units

UPMC picked up on **Ashley Iannazzo's** (BSN '11, MSN '14, DNP '17) star power back when she was still a nursing student in her senior clinical rotations. She was placed at UPMC Magee-Womens Hospital and loved working in medical-surgical and geriatric units.

Iannazzo applied for a position on UPMC Magee-Womens Hospital's medical-surgical telemetry unit during her senior year and was hired over spring break.

"I was very excited to have a job before all my friends," she says. "All of my student experiences really led me to start my UPMC journey."

Leadership opportunities quickly followed. Within her first year on the job, Iannazzo was training as a charge nurse—an experience that helped clarify her passions.

"I always liked solving problems," she recalls. "I liked being the person people could come to—whether it was another nurse, a patient or a family member."

That desire to understand the bigger picture led her back to Pitt to earn a master's degree in the former Clinical Nurse Leader program.

The degree path's rigor—and its emphasis on stepping outside one's comfort zone—proved transformative. As part of her required clinical hours, Iannazzo spent nearly a year embedded in UPMC Magee-Womens Hospital's quality department, working in risk management and patient safety.

"One of the things I really appreciated about Pitt was that I was required to be in person with someone outside the unit I was working on," she says. "That exposure really changed everything for me."



Ashley Iannazzo
BSN '11, MSN '14, DNP '17

“Tell your leaders and mentors what you want. If they don’t know where you want to go, they can’t help you get there.”

The impact was immediate. The weekend she graduated, Iannazzo received a call from her clinical director. The hospital’s risk manager had gone on leave, and Iannazzo was asked to step into a temporary fellowship. Before long, she was offered the position full-time.

From there, her career continued to evolve across nursing education, quality and hospital administration. She earned a doctorate before eventually joining UPMC’s Center for Nursing Excellence in 2020, where her leadership skills continued to blossom.

Today, as the vice president of clinical workforce operations for UPMC Nursing, her scope includes nearly 600 direct and indirect reports. Her portfolio encompasses major system initiatives, including the launch of UPMC Travel Staffing during the height of the COVID-19 nursing shortage and, more recently, oversight of UPMC’s Virtual Care Center.

Iannazzo is equally proud of the mentorship she’s provided others along the way. “I’ve helped nurses go back to school, coached leaders into new roles and supported people getting exposure they might not have otherwise had,” she says.

She describes her leadership style as collaborative and supportive.

“I approach leadership like a sports coach,” she says. “I want everyone to understand their individual role and how it contributes to the bigger picture.”

Rather than giving answers, she often turns questions back to her team. “I’ll ask, ‘What do you think? How do you think that would work?’” she says. “Helping people solve problems instead of telling them what to do is important to me.”

Iannazzo credits Pitt Nursing faculty for playing a pivotal role in her leadership development. She points to Heidi Donovan, Rosemary Hoffman, Margaret Rosenzweig and Patricia Tuite as lasting influences.

“Everyone at Pitt is always in your corner,” she says. “They help you get anywhere you want to be—and they spend a lot of individualized time doing it.”

Shaping Workforce Strategy at Scale

For **Melanie Heuston (MSN '04, DNP '06)**, leadership has never been about chasing titles—it has been about loving nursing deeply enough to shape its future.

That enthusiasm—and the mentors who recognized it—set her on a path to becoming the inaugural chief nursing executive of WVU Medicine, the largest health system in West Virginia.

When she began her journey as a Pitt Nursing graduate student, she could not have imagined where it would lead.

“Not for one second did I think I’d be doing this work,” she says. “I just knew I wanted to be a really good nurse.”

At the time, Heuston was working at UPMC Presbyterian when she began collaborating with Gail Wolf, a chief nursing officer, Pitt faculty member and pivotal mentor who encouraged her to pursue her master’s degree at the University. Yet, it was during an especially difficult chapter of Heuston’s life. She had just been widowed and had two small children. Still, Heuston listened.

“I trusted her because she was a good mentor,” she says. “I’m glad I did because that degree really served me as I progressed through leadership.



Melanie Heuston
(MSN '04, DNP '06)

“While you are in your program, it is important to look for experiences that are out of your comfort zone. Look for experiences with leaders that may not already know you. It is so important to broaden your horizons.”

It added credibility to my work and helped me apply what I was learning directly to practice.”

Years later, after completing her master’s degree, Wolf encouraged her once again—this time to pursue a doctorate. Heuston remembers the moment clearly.

“She put her hand on my shoulder and said, ‘You’re going to start working on your doctorate soon, aren’t you?’” Heuston recalls. “I said, ‘No, I’m good. I am too old, and I don’t think I will need this.’”

Wolf’s response became career-defining. “She said, ‘You’re going to be 50 someday. Do you want to be 50 with a doctorate or without one?’” Heuston says. “And I thought—well, if you say it that way.”

So, at age 44, Heuston went on to earn her Doctor of Nursing Practice from Pitt Nursing in 2006.

“I continue to use that education nearly every single day of my career,” she says. “The core competencies are timeless.”

Her doctoral project focused on transformational leadership behaviors of

successful nurse managers.

More than 15 years later, Heuston continues to share and publish the work within her project.

“The burden on nurse managers is even heavier today,” she says. “The appreciative inquiry work I did—looking at what nurse managers do well—has continued to serve me in so many ways.”

Yet, what has influenced her more than anything over the years, she says, is the support she’s received from fellow leaders.

“I think it’s critical,” she says. “Susan Hoolahan, who went on to become president of UPMC Passavant, mentored me for five years. She literally oriented me to being a chief nurse officer—every single day.”

That mentorship shaped how Heuston now leads others. Today, as WVU Medicine’s chief nursing executive, Heuston’s role is almost entirely strategic.

Her focus includes strengthening academic partnerships, supporting chief nurses across 25 hospitals and expanding the nursing pipeline through programs like WVU Medicine’s Aspiring Nurses Program.

Rather than seeing her role as directive, Heuston views it as supportive.

“The nurses at the hospitals are carrying the ship,” she says. “I’m just putting wind in their sails.”

Among her proudest accomplishments are leading Magnet journeys at multiple hospitals—a distinction granted by the American Nurses Credentialing Center to acknowledge excellence in health care and nursing. Heuston values these milestones not for the recognition itself but for the work behind it.

“The status isn’t the important piece,” she says. “It’s the roadmap. It’s what you build along the way.”

Spurring Systemwide Change

From the beginning of her nursing career, **Tamra Minnier (BSN ’84, MSN ’85)** was motivated by one simple belief: If she could make things better for nurses, she could make things better for patients.



Tamra Minnier
(BSN ’84, MSN ’85)

“Raise your hand. Try. Don’t be afraid to apologize. Don’t be afraid to say, ‘I made a mistake.’ The world respects leaders who are honest, humble and willing to listen. The higher you go, the easier it is to become disconnected—and that’s where leaders fail.”

In her role as the senior vice president of operations for UPMC Health Services Division, Minnier has done just that, overseeing the Surgical Services, Pharmacy, Imaging, and Laboratory service lines throughout the UPMC system. Her purview includes more than 40 hospitals and 800 doctor’s offices and outpatient facilities—an impressive rise to leadership from when she began her nursing career at the age of 19.

After earning her associate’s degree at the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford, Minnier returned to the Pittsburgh campus to complete her Bachelor of Science in Nursing. It was there that her leadership trajectory truly took shape, guided by faculty members who recognized both her potential and her restlessness to improve the system around her.

“When I came to the main campus, Terry Carroll was leading the nursing administration program,” she says. “I remember thinking, ‘This woman is amazing.’”

At the time, Minnier was a new administrator at the Bradford Regional Medical Center and was feeling the weight of leadership challenges.

“She could sense what I was feeling,” Minnier says. “She could sense the challenges but also the opportunities. She told me, ‘You’re already on a leadership trajectory. You should think about your master’s degree.’”

That encouragement mattered. “Terry was instrumental—not just in connecting with me as a student but in helping me feel like what I wanted to accomplish mattered,” Minnier says. “I’ve always had this passion to make things better.”

Another formative influence was Marguerite Schaefer, a former Pitt Nursing dean whose situational leadership class proved foundational to Minnier’s career.

“When I took her course, I felt like I had found the Holy Grail,” she remembers. “For the first time, someone said there isn’t just one way to lead. You have to think about the situation you’re in, what you’re trying to accomplish and how you go about it.”

The foundation she built at Pitt has continued to serve her throughout her career and played a major role in the formation of her own leadership style.

“It’s all about the people,” she says. “Leadership is a privilege. Small things matter. The team is everything. When you build the right culture and align people around a shared vision, the sky’s the limit.”

That philosophy has taken her far. She’s been a leader at UPMC for more than 25 years and also serves as a sought-after public speaker and international health care leader, speaking on topics including quality, patient safety, clinical improvement and leadership. She has seen her influence ripple across borders—sometimes in unexpected ways.

“One of the most surreal moments of my life was visiting a radiation oncology site in Italy,” she says. “They brought me over to a certificate on the wall—an accreditation certificate—and I had signed it in my role as chair of the board

for Joint Commission International/Joint Commission Resources.”

The experience was humbling. “I’m always a little shocked when people say they’re excited to meet me,” she laughs. “But for me, it’s always about the give-back.”

It is also about staying connected to the work happening on the ground, she notes. Minnier still makes regular rounds, believing proximity matters.

“Stay close,” she says. “People will tell you what’s right and wrong if you listen.”

As she looks ahead, Minnier is focused on succession, mentorship and sponsorship—using her influence to open doors for others.

“Sponsorship is saying someone’s name in a room they’re not in,” she says. “That visibility can change everything.”

Leading With Authenticity and Impact

Leadership in nursing was a calling **Helene Burns (DNP ’18)** recognized early and followed with intention.

“I’m celebrating my 45th year as a nurse,” Burns says. “My first five years were at the bedside, but after that, I did the entire progression—nursing supervisor, nurse manager, director, assistant vice president, vice president, chief nursing officer and then chief nurse executive.”

The increase in responsibility felt natural to her. “Even at the bedside, I was often the charge nurse,” she recalls. “Leadership always made sense to me.”

When Burns enrolled in Pitt Nursing’s Health Systems Executive Leadership doctorate program, she was already serving as a chief nurse executive.

“The content was so rich,” she says. Some of it reinforced what I already knew, but it really helped me become a stronger leader.”

Burns credits Pitt Nursing with delivering both academic rigor and real-world flexibility—an essential combination for a senior executive.

“I did my homework when I was looking at doctoral programs,” she says. “Pitt



Helene Burns
(DNP '18)

“We’re all lifelong learners. If you think leadership is your path, take advantage of every opportunity. Go back to school, attend conferences, get involved in professional organizations and find mentors.”

came right to the top. I loved that it was online and on demand. I could get up early in the morning, do work on the weekends and still have a high-level executive role at the same time.”

Equally impactful were the faculty mentors who supported her throughout the program. Among other key faculty members, Judy Zedreck played a particularly meaningful role.

“She was just so supportive and provided such great guidance,” Burns says. “She was the perfect person to have behind the scenes, giving me encouragement as I was going through the program.”

Burns recently served as chief nursing and operations executive at AtlantiCare, where staying connected to frontline nurses remains central to her leadership philosophy.

“I think that’s a really important part of being a nurse executive,” she explains. “You have to stay in touch and understand where staff are and what they need.”

She does that through regular rounds and what she calls “listening sessions”—bringing people together to discuss what’s going well and what support they need.

“You’re an effective leader when you speak from the heart,” she says. “You’re authentic. You follow up. You deliver what you can. And if something is out of your control, you’re honest about that.”

Among her proudest career moments are achievements that reflect both personal excellence and organizational impact. Burns has been inducted as a fellow into both the American Academy of Nursing and the American Organization for Nursing Leadership—milestones she describes as career highlights.

But one stands above the rest: the moment she learned that AtlantiCare had become a Magnet organization. She says, “It takes a lot of work to get there,” and recalls watching bedside nurses completing the Magnet survey and confidently describing their practice.

“To see how proud they were of the work they do—that makes everything worth it,” she says.

Though she retired in March 2026, Burns quickly enrolled in an executive coaching program and is now shifting her focus to mentoring emerging nurse leaders.

“When you start nursing, you don’t always know what your path will be,” she says. “But my natural path was leadership. What makes me happiest is being able to make positive changes that affect a lot of nurses.”

A Legacy of Leadership—and an Invitation Forward

Though their careers span different generations and roles, these alumnae share a common perspective: Leadership is not about authority—it’s about responsibility. Responsibility to listen. To mentor. To stay connected to the front line. To use influence not for personal advancement but to uplift others.

Each credits Pitt Nursing not just for its academic rigor but for something deeper—faculty mentors who saw potential before they did, programs that pushed them beyond comfort zones and experiences that opened doors they didn’t yet know existed. Now, they are opening doors for the next generation of nursing leaders who, like those before them, will help build a brighter future for nurses and their patients. ■



Empowering “Gwen’s Girls”

By Emily Nunez

From an early age, **Kathi Elliott (MSN '08)** learned some dreams are worth fighting for. Her mother, the late Gwendolyn Elliott, was a U.S. Air Force and National Guard veteran who became the first Black female commander of the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police in 1986, despite facing discrimination and deterrents at every turn.

Gwendolyn advocated for vulnerable populations and victims of crime, and her daughter followed her lead.

“Her being among the first women in a career that typically was just for men showed me not only her resilience but also her compassion for people,” Elliott says of her mother’s influence. “She let me know that no matter what I wanted to do, whatever I put my mind to, I would be able to do it—even if no one else that looks like me had been in that role before.”

Driven by that same desire to help people, Elliott became a psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioner and ultimately the CEO of Gwen’s Girls, the organization her mother founded in 2002 to empower girls and young women across Pittsburgh. Gwen’s Girls offers programs tailored to different age groups—from 8-year-olds to early adults—including after-school and summer programs, homework help and mental health services.

Since taking the helm in 2015, Elliott has expanded the nonprofit’s scope and resources. She has rolled out science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) programming, as well as the Black Girls Equity Alliance (BGEA), an initiative aimed at addressing structural inequities that affect child welfare, juvenile justice, and the education, health and wellness of Black girls.

Last year, BGEA released a report announcing that referrals of Black girls to Allegheny County’s juvenile court were significantly down—a change Elliott attributed to collective action to address racial disparities in school discipline.

“My nursing education is the foundation of everything I do. I was taught not only about compassion and care but to be a critical thinker and a problem solver—to work independently but also to be a team player.”

—Kathi Elliott



Since its inception, the nonprofit has based its programming on the best available research and practices. Elliott never expected to take over her mother’s organization, but her nursing education proved to be the perfect training. She holds a bachelor’s degree in psychology and a dual master’s degree in nursing and social work from the University of Pittsburgh, as well as a doctorate in nursing from Chatham University.

“My nursing education is the foundation of everything I do. I was taught not only about compassion and care but to be a critical thinker and a problem solver—to work independently but also to be a team player,” she says. “Nursing is a profession where you’re the glue that brings all the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary people together, and that has definitely aided me in the work I do at Gwen’s Girls.”

Nearly 15 years ago, Elliott started working as a psychiatric nurse practitioner with the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System, primarily helping veterans in rural, community-based clinics. She still works there one day per week, and her mental health expertise continues to guide her leadership with Gwen’s Girls.

Every girl enrolled in the after-school program has access to a therapist, and they’re taught how to identify the signs of depression and anxiety in themselves

and others. Gwen’s Girls also offers communitywide social and emotional learning support programs, and they’re working to extend mental health services to more people.

“We go into schools in the community and provide group as well as one-on-one sessions on anger management, conflict resolution, healthy relationships—all those things that impact their relationships on a day-to-day basis,” she says.

Elliott is excited for the next chapter of Gwen’s Girls. The nonprofit is planning to open a new building in the Pittsburgh region this summer that will be an “enhancement” of the services they already offer, including life skills and career pathway programming, Elliott says.

When asked about the most rewarding part of her job, Elliott says she’s proud to continue her mother’s work by “helping people solve problems and achieve happiness.” Gwen’s Girls has served nearly 10,000 girls and counting, equipping them with the skills and mental fortitude to succeed in all areas of their lives.

“We’ve been going strong since 2002,” she says, “so still providing quality services and continuing my mother’s legacy of empowering girls—I think that is success in itself.” ■



In Memoriam

1950s

Edna Mae Gerner (BSN '54)

Evaleen Johnson (BSN '58)

Mary Kazik Trusela (BSNEd '55)

1960s

Sue Ann Crytzer (BSN '67)

Letitia C. Goodman (BSN '61)

Elsie Marie Zinovenko (BSN '67)

1970s

Anne Louise Hitchak (BSN '76, MNEd '81)

Nancy Just Young (BSN '76)

Vera Z. Spear (BSN '75)

Willa Doswell, 1944–2026



Willa Marlene Doswell, a Pitt Nursing faculty member who retired in July 2025 after 31 years of teaching, died on Jan. 26, 2026, at the age of 81. Doswell devoted her career to studying and promoting the health and well-being of girls, especially African American girls between the ages of 9 and 14 years.

Doswell earned a PhD in nursing from New York University and published research on a variety of issues that affect adolescent and preadolescent girls, including self-image and self-esteem, sexual health and risk-taking behaviors. Working alongside Pitt Nursing colleagues, she also studied self-advocacy as a tool to build trust between maternal health providers and Black women, a population that faces higher rates of maternal mortality.

Beyond her research, her compassion was felt across Pittsburgh in the many communities she touched. Over the years, she helped organize health fairs, food and clothing drives, baby showers for new mothers and pet food drives to support struggling pet owners.

Through her involvement in the Homewood, Hill District and Hazelwood Community Engagement Centers, she helped to make community health fairs a success. She mobilized Pitt Nursing faculty members and student volunteers to give health talks, take vital signs, distribute hygiene supplies and provide vital information to underserved communities.

In recognition of her contributions, she was named a 2019 Woman of Excellence by the New Pittsburgh Courier—an award given annually to African American women who have made significant contributions to the community. She was also a fellow of the American Academy of Nursing, a prestigious designation for nursing leaders. ■





Alumni Achievements

Alumna Wins National League for Nursing Award



Bernadette Mazurek Melnyk (MSN '83) was one of two people to receive a prestigious 2025 President's Award from the National League for Nursing—an honor bestowed on outstanding leaders in nursing education.

Melnyk is an inspirational speaker, author, leader and entrepreneur who has led the evidence-based practice movement in nursing since the late 1990s. She is also recognized as an expert in mental health, population health and well-being, intervention research and organizational culture change.

She founded two educational consulting practices, COPE2Thrive and EBPSolutions, to advance evidence-based decision-making and improve health care quality and clinician well-being. For COPE2Thrive, Melnyk developed a series of evidence-based cognitive-behavioral skills-building programs to treat depression and anxiety. Her programs have been used by primary care practices in 50 states, as well as in universities and elementary, middle and high schools around the globe.

Nurse Scientist Recognized for Advancing Cardiac Research

Karina Kraevsky (PhD '25), a Pitt Nursing alumna and fellow with the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, earned an American Heart Association award in November 2025 for proposing a technological tool to improve the treatment of heart failure patients.

Awarded to one registered nurse with a PhD each year, the Martha N. Hill Early Career Investigator Award recognizes new investigators who have made significant contributions to the study, prevention and treatment of cardiovascular diseases.

Kraevsky's decision support tool could help clinicians identify the underlying cause of dyspnea, or difficulty breathing, in patients with heart failure who come to the emergency room. The tool would leverage machine learning methods and data collected by nurses within the first 15 minutes of a patient's visit to provide quick insights, enabling health care providers to deliver more timely and personalized treatment and potentially saving more lives.



Maternal Health Advocate Receives National Award

Margaret Larkins-Pettigrew (BSN '74) was named the 2025 winner of the American Heart Association's Louis B. Russell, Jr. Memorial Award, which recognizes outstanding efforts to address health care disparities or provide services to underserved communities.

In addition to her nursing degree, Larkins-Pettigrew also holds a Master of Public Policy and Management

and a Doctor of Medicine from Pitt. Throughout her career, she has advocated for equitable health care, especially among Black mothers and infants—populations that statistically face higher risks of mortality.

Previously, as senior vice president of the Institute for Strategic Social and Workforce Programs with Highmark Health/Allegheny Health Network,

she launched a program to reduce preterm birth rates and infant deaths in Pittsburgh. She continues to operate a general gynecology practice and now works for Drexel University's College of Medicine, where she teaches and chairs the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology.

Alumna Named Chief Nursing Officer of Hallmark

Andrea Mazzocoli (PhD '06) was named the inaugural chief nursing officer of Hallmark Health Care Solutions, a technology company specializing in health care workforce management, in July 2025. She brings more than 40 years of experience to the position and previously served as the first chief nurse executive of the Bon Secours Mercy Health system.

"Nurses deserve solutions that are designed with their realities in mind. Technology should work with nurses, not against them," Mazzocoli said in a statement. "My focus will be helping health system leaders build stronger, more sustainable staffing models that support caregiver well-being and strengthen a culture rooted in quality, safety and compassion."



Nurse Practitioner Authors Book

Cara Joy Torres (BSN '07) authored a book, "Welcome to the Jungle: From Concrete Jungle to Inner Oasis," partly inspired by her experiences as a forensic nurse practitioner at a child advocacy center in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Midwife Makes Milestone Delivery

As a midwife at Western Pennsylvania's only standalone birth center, **Jessie Holmquist (BSN '14, DNP '19)** delivered The Midwife Center's 10,000th baby in March 2026.

Fellowships

Over the last year, Pitt Nursing alumni have been accepted into several nursing fellowship programs. These prestigious designations are granted to exceptional nurses, leaders and researchers who have greatly impacted their fields. Those honored include:

Jennifer Adamski (MSN '02)

American Academy of Nursing, 2025

Kafuli Agbemenu (MSN '09, PhD '14)

American Academy of Nursing, 2025

Maya Clark-Cutaia (PhD '12)

American Academy of Nursing, 2025

American Association of Nurse Practitioners, 2026

Tammy Eaton (PhD '21)

American Academy of Nursing, 2025

Jessica Lazzeri (DNP '23)

American Academy of Nursing, 2025

Renee Thompson

(BSN '01, MSN '04, DNP '13)

American Organization for Nursing Leadership, 2026

Monica Tucker-Schwartz (DNP '21)

American Organization for Nursing Leadership, 2026



From left, Pitt Nursing alumni and supporters John Gallagher, Jennifer Adamski, Thomasina Vaina, Alphonse Vaina, Stacey Vaina and Patrick Vaina attended the Distinguished Alumni Awards on Sept. 20, 2025.

Pitt Nursing Celebrates Distinguished Alumni

In recognition of their achievements and contributions to the field of nursing, five alumni received 2025–26 Distinguished Alumni Awards from Pitt Nursing:

Distinguished Service Award:

Jennifer Adamski (MSN '02)

Clinical Associate Professor and Assistant Dean of Professional Programs, Case Western Reserve University

Distinguished Teaching Excellence Awards:

Gerene Bauldoff (MSN '93, PhD '01)

Academy Professor Emeritus–Clinical, Ohio State University
Nurse Scientist, Center for Nursing Excellence,
Nationwide Children's Hospital

Rachel Cellurale (BSN '07, MSN '11)

Assistant CRNA Clinical Director,
UPMC Magee–Womens Hospital

Distinguished Practice Award:

Margaret–Ann Carno (PhD '02)

Interim Director, Pediatric Acute Care Nurse Practitioner program, University of Rochester

Distinguished Research Award:

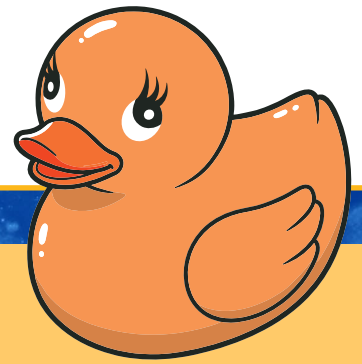
Nora Warshawsky (BSN '82)

Nurse Scientist, Press Ganey Associates



Clockwise from top left: Pitt Nursing Dean Christine E. Kasper pictured with Gerene Bauldoff, Nora Warshawsky, Laura Fennimore and Margaret–Ann Carno.

Ducky Diaries



Throughout 2026, we're inviting alumni, students and faculty to share their stories—and snag a few snapshots—with our Pitt Nurse rubber duck ambassadors.

In a quacking recent installment of “Ducky Diaries,” our year-long social media campaign, we asked alumni:

Why do you feel lucky to be a nurse?



“I feel lucky to be a nurse (and, even better, a Pitt nurse!) because it gives me the opportunity to help educate the next generation of nurses. While many nurses make a direct impact at the bedside, educators have the privilege of shaping the future of the profession by preparing nurses who will go on to care for countless patients and communities.”

Elizabeth Skrovanek (BSN '14, PhD '20)

“Five years ago, I was applying for Pitt’s DNP Adult–Gerontology Clinical Nurse Specialist Program. Today, I am presenting at the National Association of Clinical Nurse Specialists Annual Conference on the work that I do as a board-certified CNS!”

Jennifer Servant (DNP '24)

“I have had an amazing career as a nurse which started at Pitt—from bedside in OB to managing an IVF practice to being a leader in varied settings. The best part was being an educator and promoting

education for students and staff. My proudest accomplishments are the nurses who have gone on to higher degrees and become midwives, cancer ARNP hospitalists, nurse CRNAs, managers and directors. Seeing these former students and colleagues succeed is the best reward.”

Marti Jenner (BSN '68)



“I’m lucky to be a nurse and honored to care for and comfort people when they need it the most.”

Maria Hamidi (BSN '94)

“Thanks to Pitt, quite a journey I was allowed to take! As a Pitt nurse, I was able to participate in Operation Enduring Freedom at Landstuhl Regional Army Medical Center in Germany. A rewarding experience to say the least!”

Patrick Verville (BSN '83)

“I am lucky to be a nurse because it allowed me to have a career where I accomplished two things most important to me. As a home care nurse and a case manager, I was able to care for people and teach them to care for themselves and I was able to be an advocate for my patients to ensure they received the proper care at the proper time.”

Nancy Crouthamel (BSN '75, MSN '83)



Want to join or just follow along?

Email Emily Nunez at emn143@pitt.edu for details on how to participate, and don't forget to follow us on Instagram and Facebook to see new Ducky Diaries posts each month!



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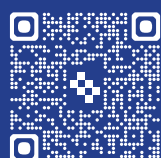


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