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Maternal-Child Leadership Academy rekindles joy of nursing

By Cindy Dashnaw

Working in the Women and Infant Services division of Washington Hospital Center in Washington, D.C., Valarie Ricks, RN, MS, was focused on her patients. She knew that expectant mothers at this large inner-city hospital, about 60 percent of whom relied on Medicaid, needed education to develop effective parenting skills. So when she was accepted into the Maternal-Child Health Leadership Academy, her planned leadership project was to create a team to adapt the perinatal education program to support the needs of these underserved urban patients.



Valarie Ricks with Ann Marie Brooks, RN, DNSc, MBA, FAAN, FACHE, faculty member of Sigma Theta Tau International Leadership Academy and former dean of The Catholic University of America School of Nursing, Washington, D.C.

When Ricks broached the idea to nursing staff members, however, their response was unenthusiastic.

Women and Infant Services had recently implemented Family-centered care including a mother-baby coupling program. "The changes involved in moving from traditional obstetric care to a patient-centered model of care were substantial and, at times, even overwhelming to our nurses," she said. "They already had too much going on to take on another project."

Ricks, a clinical manager, wanted to rekindle the passion these nurses once felt in the early days of their careers. She interviewed 17 staff nurses to find out why they had chosen nursing as a career, what motivated them to remain nurses, how they viewed their profession and how they defined teamwork. At the conclusion of the interviews, it was apparent that the nurses were not ready for a new project. They were in need of the passion they once had for their profession.

Ricks was enrolled as a mentee in the Maternal-Child Health Leadership Academy (MCH), a collaboration of Johnson & Johnson and the Honor Society of Nursing, Sigma Theta Tau International. Designed to prepare nurses to influence practice and patient outcomes, the 18-month academy offers nurses worldwide the opportunity to be guided by a mentor and faculty member through their personal leadership journey. Mentees and their teams would also develop pilot projects that serve as a platform for enacting their leadership competency and skill.

"Johnson & Johnson places a high value on leadership and social responsibility. It's an integral part of our business. The Maternal-Child Health program is part of our strategic focus on building health care capacity by supporting leadership and management programs focused on health care system efficiency and effectiveness. We are dedicated to improving the quality of patient care by supporting development of experienced health care professionals worldwide."

—Joanne Fillweber, manager, corporate contributions, Johnson & Johnson



Rebecca S. "Suzie" Miltner, RNC-OB, PhD, NEA-BC, director of Women and Infant Services at Washington Hospital Center, invited Ricks to apply to the program.

"Val seemed to have wisdom beyond her years, an intellectual curiosity, a spark there that was just waiting to be ignited," Miltner said. "I felt that she had all the right skills to be a leader. She just needed the right opportunity."

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Miltner was right. Valarie did have the skills and passion needed to be accepted into the MCH Academy.

"I was relatively new to my role as Women and Infant Services director, and I thought it was a great opportunity for both of us," Miltner said. "I've worked at organizations before that never thought of themselves as able to compete on a national level, and that way of thinking holds people back. I just decided we should apply. We were surprised to be picked, but very pleased."

When Ricks started the program, her leadership development project focused on the education of expectant mothers; however, after continuing to interview the staff nurses, it became painfully clear that the focus of her leadership project needed to shift. She decided to take a risk and re-evaluate the needs of staff nurses, as well as Washington Hospital Center.

"Val was waiting for me in the hallway early one morning," Miltner said. "She knew we needed to change our project. That was the brilliant thing: She realized she needed to reach the staff first before she could ask them to take on another project."

"Because they thought of nursing as a daily task, they didn't see it as a profession. Nursing had been their childhood dream, but it had become just a job. They talked about how teamwork was important, but they couldn't articulate what it meant," she said. "I thought: What can we do to get them to think back to the day they decided to be a nurse, the day they passed their boards, the day they got their first good IV stick?"

Ricks decided to implement an employee development program designed to allow nurses in her division to refocus, reconnect and find passion in nursing again. This program is now known as First Fridays. On the first Friday of each month, she invited nurses to attend a one-hour session in which a storyteller used parables to demonstrate how every individual can have an effect on others. Interactive activities reinforced the message that everyone has the opportunity to make significant contributions. Ricks created a relaxing environment by decorating the meeting room with different themes each month. She also showcased framed photos of nurses on the job to communicate that each nurse was a valued member of a patient's health care team.

Each First Friday program was held three times—twice on Friday and once on Saturday—to enable nurses from all shifts to attend. Nurse managers covered patient care during the sessions. First Fridays has continued for more than a year now, meeting quarterly instead of monthly, and still generates enthusiastic attendance and positive feedback.

"The nurses feel like management is rewarding them for their hard work. For weeks after a First Friday event, there seems to be more engagement among the nurses," Ricks said. "Every time we touch a patient, we touch a piece of the future. How remarkable is that? We have to find a way to maintain that feeling."

Miltner has no doubt Ricks can find a way. She believes more than ever that Ricks and MCH were a perfect match.

"I've been a nurse for 26 years," Miltner said. "I've been in the military and have done several different kinds of training. The leadership academy is a very well-structured program, and the support we got from our Sigma Theta Tau faculty member, Ann Marie Brooks, was phenomenal," Miltner said. "In fact, the whole program was phenomenal."

Once accepted into MCH, participants attend the first academy workshop based on their personal leadership development. After completing the first workshop, the mentor-mentee pair begins to implement the leadership development project. Midway through the 18-month program, the group again convenes to focus on implementation and evaluation of their leadership journey and projects. At the conclusion of the program, participants have the opportunity to present a poster of their work at the Sigma Theta Tau International Biennial Convention. A dinner celebration is also held at the convention to recognize each of the academy graduates.

In addition to the Maternal-Child Health Leadership Academy, the honor society's International Leadership Institute offers leadership development programs and career development resources designed to improve leadership skills and develop nurses' unique gifts and talents. Other programs include:

Board Leadership Development Program—Participants in this two-year program gain knowledge and skills in the core aspects of trusteeship, fiduciary responsibilities, board and staff partnerships, strategic thinking and generative governance.

Geriatric Nursing Leadership Academy—Based on the successful Maternal-Child Health Leadership Academy, this program prepares nurse leaders to direct interprofessional teams working to improve health care quality for older adults and their families. This 18-month academy is sponsored by a generous grant from The John A. Hartford Foundation.

As a result of Ricks' exceptional leadership journey, she was given the opportunity to continue as an MCH faculty member for the 2008-09 academy. She believes her experience will help her guide other nurses.

"I am encouraging nurses in my department, Women and Infant Services, to design projects and apply to the program," she said. "This experience has caused me to really look at myself as a manager and figure out how I can change to better serve the people I manage," Ricks said. "It has also caused me to look at the whole nursing industry. We have to develop our younger nurses. Today's graduates are nothing like the graduates of 20 years ago. To reach this new generation, we're going to have to eat, sleep and breathe innovation."

Miltner is confident that Ricks is ready.

"Valarie has her master's degree, but she never thought she could be a national leader. She went to Sigma Theta Tau's Biennial Convention and absolutely blossomed," Miltner said. "I believe that now she sees the leader she is and can be. It has made her see the possibilities for the rest of her career."

Learn more about the [International Leadership Institute online](#), and visit the institute's [CareerMap](#)—an online resource to help nurses build, manage and advance their careers.

Cindy Dashnaw is the owner of Cindy Dashnaw Freelance Writer Inc. in Greenfield, Indiana, USA.

Additional resource:

Ricks, V.D., & Miltner, R. (2008). First Fridays: Celebrating the nursing profession. *Nurse Leader*, 6(2), 36-39. Retrieved September 11, 2008, from http://www.nurseleader.com/issues/contents?issue_key=S1541-4612%2808%29X0003-5

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