

New Mexico Nurses Who Inspire Nurses

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What makes a nurse, or a nurse's career path inspirational? Their paths can differ widely as we find nurse roles almost everywhere today. There are also some commonalities across individual nurses that nurses find to be inspiring. We have chosen to kick off an ongoing column this May in celebration of Nurses' Month. This, and subsequent column entries, will feature interviews with diverse nurses in the state who have inspired other New Mexico nurses to embrace, find joys in, and enrich their own nursing lives.

Each edition will feature different nurses' stories. Is there a NM Nurse who has been a major inspiration to you in the development of your career? We want to know about them! Contact: dwalker@Nmna.nursingnetwork.com



Melissa Wyaco, DNPc, MHA, BSN, ADN-RN

grew up in rural New Mexico from Zuni Pueblo. Inspired by her mother and aunt, both

LPNs, at 3 years old she recalls admiring their pristine white uniforms and caps and the care they took in preparing for their nursing duties. An awareness of the few native Zuni women who had become nurses developed in her a desire to increase their number in her community. Ms. Wyaco earned her Associate Degree in Nursing in 1988. In 1991, she completed her BSN so that she could reach her long-term goal of becoming a public health nurse in the Indian Health Service. Both degrees were from the UNM Gallup branch. Life-long learning as a path to achieve her nursing goals is a theme throughout her career. To prepare for entry into the C-suite to run a health facility in Gallup, she achieved this, and obtained a Master's in Health Administration in 2017. Inspired by her cousin to go on for her DNP in leadership, she anticipates finishing her UNM DNP in May of this year. Her son, Brian, following in her footsteps, also plans to

graduate with his BSN in May. This marks the third generation of nurses in their family—an achievement that brings her immense joy.

During her nursing journey, Melissa encountered challenges but found solace in the guidance of a supportive faculty member who believed in her capabilities. This mentor adopted innovative and more culturally inclusive teaching styles that supported key learning for her and others to move forward successfully. With gratitude, she continues to pay it forward, nurturing, and empowering aspiring nurses throughout her career. She has integrated into her nursing ethos an acute awareness of “standing on the shoulders of others” and paying those gifts forward in all things. Melissa fondly recalls the transformation of a young nursing assistant she mentored, who in a ripple effect became a Family Nurse Practitioner.

Remaining deeply passionate about nursing, Melissa approaches challenges with optimism and innovation, refusing to accept limitations. Nursing, to her, is not just a profession but a journey rooted in her identity as a native Zuni woman, intertwined with her cultural heritage and traditions. She is committed to leveraging best practices to enhance community health outcomes and collaborating with diverse communities.

Despite facing nursing challenges such as staffing shortages, poor patient outcomes, and limited resources, Melissa remains resilient, driven by a steadfast determination to make a meaningful difference in her community. She firmly believes in the power of education and collective effort to effect positive change; advocating for a shift from siloed approaches to collaborative, inclusive models that prioritize the collective well-being of communities and patients alike. As for maintaining her passion as a nurse amid so many challenges, she says “Be open to new things, think out of the box, build creative solutions, and inspire others.”



Keith Carlson, BSN, RN, NC-BC is a nurse known for his articulate, insightful, and introspective nature. Growing up, he was captivated

by stories of nursing shared by his three aunts, which ignited his interest in the profession. Beginning his nursing journey with an ADN in 1996 as an opportunity to set an example for his young son, he then went on to earn his BSN in 2001. As an opportunity to set an example for his young son, he earned a BSN in 2001.

Keith has repeatedly chosen uncommon career paths and demonstrated that nurses can achieve success across a broad landscape of professional options. Knowing he did not want a hospital career; he initially chose roles in community nursing working with vulnerable populations. Over the years, he has found himself in settings such as federally qualified health centers (FQHCs), home health, public health, hospice, and currently travel medicine. He has also served in leadership positions as a Chief Nursing Officer CNO and DON Director of Nursing.

Choosing to refine his clinical skills early while making a meaningful impact led Keith to specialize in HIV/AIDS and specialty case management in western Massachusetts, where he embraced the challenges of addressing patients' holistic needs. Despite practicing with relative autonomy and the trust of his patients, experiencing the depth of their disparities and unmet needs led Keith towards a period of burnout, prompting him to embark on a profound and successful journey of self-reflection in terms of his priorities and the life he truly wanted to live.

Creativity at the fore and risking yet another unusual career path, in 2005 Keith embarked on a new venture by starting one of the first nursing blogs on the internet, recognizing it as a platform for nurses' personal growth and a means to share his experiences

and insights with others. Subsequently becoming a Board-Certified Nurse Coach (NC-BC) through the American Holistic Nurses Credentialing Corporation, Keith has found fulfillment in offering career coaching in support of fellow nurses on their professional journeys. In 2012, he and two colleagues launched RNFM Radio, one of the first nursing podcasts in existence, and in 2015, he also launched The Nurse Keith Show. His podcast focuses on inspiring nurses through interviews with thought leaders in nursing, medicine, policy, advocacy, and healthcare entrepreneurship.

Motivated by a desire to serve, Keith is an avid coach, consultant, keynote speaker, and freelance writer on nurses' issues. Keith has witnessed the growth and empowerment of the individuals he has mentored, guiding them in confronting issues like pursuing entrepreneurship, navigating career transitions, and dealing with bullying, incivility, and violence in the workplace.

Keith hears many painful stories from the nurses he speaks with. He says, "It's a dance between feeling like nothing has changed, even while there are simultaneously many nurses out there who are driving really profound changes, both individually and collectively." He credits the joy he experiences in his career with seeing people grow, learning how to ask for what they need, and achieving more of what they value in their lives and careers.

Keith has lived in Santa Fe for 14 years and is marrying his beloved fiancée, the well-known traditional astrologer and teacher of the tarot and astrology, Shada McKenzie, in May of 2024.



Patricia Montoya, RN, BSN, MPA, MHA is a nurse of 49 years and lives in Albuquerque. Her family has been in New Mexico for over five generations. Patricia's parents were instrumental in her career and instilled in her the values of stoicism, a strong work ethic, integrity, and the importance of education. Her formative

years were influenced by her mother's illness. The hospital nurses who cared for her were early role models in compassion, comfort, and strength which inspired her entry into nursing. She pursued her BSN at UNM in 1971, as a first-generation college student. Her career evolved organically. She credits "being in the right place at the right time and taking risks to meet opportunities" as key features in how her career has unfolded. As she says, "My parents are angels on my shoulders and nursing has been a guiding light throughout my career" which has made me stronger and more resilient.

Her nursing career commenced at Presbyterian Hospital, where she worked in Pediatrics. There, she experienced a lingering profound sadness when her 5-year-old patient succumbed to leukemia. This guided a transition into school nursing where she thought she would work with healthier children. She now confronted another harsh reality of children suffering from conditions such as substance misuse, abuse, teen pregnancy, depression, and suicide. As more light grew on the negative impacts that social determinants of health in communities have on children's lives, and the adults they become, she became driven by a desire to influence health policy and the role that it can play in supporting well-being. She then went back to school and received a Master's in Public Administration/Health Administration.

This new path shifted her career to avenues where she could have a broader voice in guiding health. Increasingly active in local elections and campaigning for candidates, she also became active in the NMNA New Mexico Nurses Association. Subsequently, she joined the American Nurses Association (ANA), further immersing herself in federal health policy and politics. She was among the first NM pioneers contributing to getting the full scope of practice for Advanced Practice Nurses (APN) passed through her involvement in the NMNA. In 1994, NM

was among the first five states to achieve this landmark legislation. Still today, only 27 states have been successful. Her expertise led to her involvement in the development of the Hilary Clinton Health Care Reform Bill, parts of which created the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). A bipartisan success in 1997, today it is responsible for insuring millions of children nationally and thousands of NM's children. In the Fall of 1994, she was appointed by the Clinton White House as the HHS Regional Director for Region 6 (Dallas), where she served as the political/policy liaison for the five States in the Region, and then in November of 1998, she was appointed to take on the position of Commissioner for Children, Youth and Families (in the Administration for Children and Families), which was a Senate-confirmed position in Washington, DC.

After her Washington tenure, Patricia returned to NM- "... so many things that needed to be done here"- she began collaborating with then Governor Bill Richardson in the Department of Health, serving as the Secretary of Health. She was the first nurse and the first Hispanic woman to serve in this position. She now contributes her expertise as a board member for Presbyterian Central New Mexico and continues work on diverse health policy efforts. Patricia derives joy from recognizing the goodness in people, her country, and particularly her state. She believes in fostering enduring relationships and credits her policy work for enhancing her resilience and fortitude. Throughout her career, she has demonstrated a knack for identifying community needs, building robust teams to formulate policy, and upholding integrity, even in challenging circumstances. She remains committed to finding inclusive solutions by bringing individuals with diverse perspectives and strengths together.

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