



# Catholic Health, Nursing and Me

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**T**his is a story of a personal journey. Because I'm a nurse by profession and have worked at the Catholic Health Association for decades, it may be surprising that it wasn't until I joined the CHA that I found out the organization was, and is, much more than health care. It was during my first week at CHA when I attended the board meeting that I encountered the primary issue of "formation," a term I did not know in relation to health care. Formation, I learned, meant continuing the mission, values and spirit of the sisters who founded — another concept I did not know in this context — our ministries — yet another expression I had to learn, meaning our buildings and services — to continue the healing ministry of Jesus. The discussion centered on the courageous women who left their European convents to deliver nursing care in this country.

What? Many of CHA's member hospitals and nursing homes were started by nurses? I was a Catholic nurse and went to a Catholic-sponsored school of nursing. Was it true that my new organization was largely started by nurses who were compelled by their faith to care for the sick and injured in this country?

Well, yes and no. They were nurses, but also teachers and administrators and social workers and sometimes carpenters and plumbers.

This began my love affair with the nurses who have shaped Catholic health care. There was much to learn.

Suzy Farren, then the editor of CHA's newspaper *Catholic Health World*, wrote an oral history years ago about aging sisters, *A Divine Romance*. There were beautiful stories about nurses who worked long hours under difficult conditions: nurses sent to mother superior to be told the order needed dieticians, so they signed up for nutrition classes and left nursing behind. (Although nurses like to say, "once a nurse, always a nurse.")

There were stories about nurse administrators who integrated the first hospitals. There were sister nurses demonstrating for civil rights at Selma,

Alabama, on the bridge with the late John Lewis and Martin Luther King Jr. in 1965.

The then-chief nurse at Catholic Health Initiatives, Kathy Sanford, introduced me to Mother Catherine McAuley's *Careful Nursing*, a philosophy of compassionate and holistic patient care, brought to the Crimea by the Irish nurses taught by McAuley. It became part of Florence Nightingale's nursing reforms.

I read John Fialka's *Sisters* with stories about nurses who were gutsy, defiant, passionate and addressed the social determinants of health long before the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention started using the words. He wrote about the Sisters of Mercy. Trained by their order's foundress McAuley, they came to Pittsburgh, New York, San Francisco and other parts of the country. They took care of the sick in poorhouses, penitentiaries and wherever they were needed and eventually started what would become Catholic hospitals throughout the United States.

*A Call to Care*, another Suzy Farren product, taught me about the history of nursing nuns, starting in New Orleans in 1727. The book told of Mother Marianne Cope, who brought cleanliness



and order to the leper colony in Molokai, Hawaii. She also nursed Father Damien as he was dying of leprosy. Both are now recognized as saints for the brave care they provided. There are so many other examples. I read about Rose Hawthorne Lanthrop, who after taking a short course in a New York Hospital, nursed poor women who were dying of cancer. There were sisters who nursed the injured and dying in the Spanish-American War and in the Civil War.

Then I met the modern-day nurses of Catholic health care:

When I first knew of Sr. Rosemary Donley, SC, PhD, she was president of the National League for Nursing, the organization that supports nurse educators in many ways. What a delight to find her on CHA's board, where she advocated for nursing, vulnerable people and quality. She now holds an endowed chair at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh where she teaches nursing students

“Nursing is a human response to human needs for protection, assistance and consolation during times of sickness, injury, suffering and impending death. The impetus to be a nurse has its source in the spiritual dimension of the person and is associated with fulfilling a perceived purpose in life. Nursing can be a way of sharing in the Supreme Being’s love for humanity through being available to act as a healing instrument.”

From: *Careful Nursing: A Model for Contemporary Nursing Practice*  
Therese Connell Meehan BSN, PhD

about the needs of vulnerable patients and other people.

Then I met Ann Hendrich, PhD, who recently retired as senior vice president and chief quality/safety and nursing officer at Ascension Health. To her, excellence in nursing meant establishing the evidence base for quality, and she led research on preventing ICU infections, improving maternity outcomes and more. She also spearheaded the nationwide effort to make health care systems more age-friendly.

Kathy Sanford, mentioned earlier, was another nurse who believed in improving nursing knowledge. One of her first acts as chief nurse at Catholic Health Initiatives was to establish a department on nursing research. She also authored a regular column in the Healthcare Financial Management Association journal on the interface of patient care and hospital finances.

Cherie Sammis and I became great friends. She was a nurse practitioner who had learned about the horrors of human trafficking. Realizing that some patients she had previously cared for were probably victims of this modern-day form of slavery, she embarked on a mission to teach other nurses and caregivers how to identify and treat such trafficked victims.

And then I met Sister Carol. Fueled by a passion for the poor and anchored by the nursing process, Sr. Carol Keehan, DC, served as a maternal/child floor nurse, head nurse, director of nursing, hospital administrator, board member for hospitals and universities, and association president. In between, she was a quality consultant to Japanese nurses, helped establish hospitals in two countries, and is the chief pit master in her Maryland home with other Daughters of Charity. She has pens from the signing of the Affordable Care Act given to her by President Obama and House Speaker Pelosi for her tireless efforts to pass the ACA, and yet she always had time for her colleagues, whether they had a struggling child or a cancer scare. She, like so many of CHA's nurses, was both remarkably capable and remarkably caring.

I keep reading about the early nurses and keep meeting new leaders. And I am never disappointed.

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