

MINORITY NURSE

The Career and Education Resource for the Minority Nursing Professional • WINTER/SPRING 2017

Media and the Perception of Nursing



Be a Nurse Entrepreneur

**NURSE CEO
RUTH BRINKLEY**

**THE RISE OF BLACK
NURSES ROCK**

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We are living in uncertain times. With Donald Trump about to take office, the Affordable Care Act is likely to be repealed, and it's not clear what is going to happen to our nation's health care. It's more important than ever for nurses to come together and not only be advocates for patients but also for peace. To kick off 2017, this issue spotlights nursing leaders from a variety of backgrounds to give you a much needed dose of inspiration.

Currently, nurses face a host of complex issues: a health care system hanging in the balance, negative media stereotypes, workplace bullying, and unsafe staffing ratios, to name a few. In our cover story, Sandy Summers, the executive director of The Truth About Nursing, calls on each of you to step up and start speaking out for the sake of your profession. Summers has made it her mission to protect her fellow nurses and spread awareness to the public about what it is that nurses actually do. But she can't do this alone. Learn more about how you can join the fight on page 8.

In a time of uncertainty, you mustn't let fear rule you. Do you have a great idea for a new business but are too paralyzed by the possibility of failure? Take a moment to read the advice of five successful minority nurse entrepreneurs who were once in your shoes. They offer you guidance on how to get started and what to do when faced with an obstacle. Stepping outside your comfort zone is the only way you'll truly grow, so never be afraid to take that leap.

Ruth Brinkley is a shining example of what you can accomplish when you take that leap. She has never shied away from a challenging managerial position, and becoming the CEO of KentuckyOne Health is no exception. Her advice for nurses new to a leadership role? Be bold, act quickly, and surround yourself with like-minded individuals. Passion will also play a crucial role in your success.

Few women know passion better than Romeatrius Moss, the founder of Black Nurses Rock. What started out as a Facebook group for black nurses to share their struggles and successes quickly turned into an official organization in less than two years. Moss is bringing the black nursing community together to support one another and their communities.

Looking for ways to serve *your* community? A diverse workforce plays an important role, so follow in the footsteps of the male certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNAs) in our Degrees of Success column and share your nursing journey—warts and all—to encourage other minorities to pursue nursing. Or consider becoming a health policy advocate. Janice Phillips speaks with leaders of minority nursing associations to find out how they're influencing policy and empowering others to do the same.

The individuals highlighted throughout this issue are helping change the profession one nurse at a time—and there's no reason you can't, too.

—Megan Larkin

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Media Leads the

How The Truth About Nursing Is Changing the Perception of Nursing One Person at a Time

BY LYNDA LAMPERT, RN



Way

Sandy Summers, RN, MSN, MPH, executive director and founder of The Truth About Nursing, remembers when she first wanted to become a nurse: “I remember one day when I was 16 and working as a nursing assistant in a nursing home. One of the RNs said out loud, to no one in particular, about her patient who had been really groggy: ‘I’m going to hold his Haldol today.’ And I thought, ‘Really? Wow.’ I didn’t know that nurses could make autonomous decisions about how to take care of and advocate for patients. I thought they just had to give whatever was prescribed. That one sentence from that nurse inspired me, and right then I decided I was going to be a nurse.”

From there, Summers followed a course that led her to a career in ER and ICU nursing. She did work overseas, taking care of the less fortunate, but she never forgot the autonomy and advocacy that drew her into the profession in the first place. It took a woefully misguided piece of legislation from President George W. Bush in 2001 and the poor portrayal of nurses on television’s *ER* for her to find her calling.

With a group of likeminded nurses, she started an advocacy group promoting better portrayals of nursing in the media and explaining nursing’s autonomy to the public. After a couple iterations, she now leads the group The Truth About Nursing. It focuses on the media’s portrayal of nursing, but it is about so much more than that. The group seeks to change the perception of the nurse in the public at large, focusing largely on the media and nurses themselves.

In the process, Summers has become a nurse leader, although she remains humble about her status. “I just try to stay focused and do what I have to do to try to change what people think about nursing. I try to get out there to encourage nurses to take action,

and I guess because I work to rally nurses, it’s maybe natural that someone would call me a leader. But I don’t strive for people to say that.”

Nevertheless, Summers has faced down the injustice of the plight of nurses, made strides in changing media perceptions, encouraged nursing autonomy, and catapulted her group into a true powerhouse in the realm of nursing advocacy.

Leadership and Injustice on a Grand Scale

Why does this work mean so much? Why not focus on something else when there are so many things in the world that a nurse can do?

“It’s so unjust what’s happening to patients, that they get this care that is presented to them by hospitals or schools as nursing care,” Summers responds. “But in fact it’s often ‘nursing assistant care,’ or ‘patient technician care’—patients are receiving ‘nursing care’ by people who are not nurses. It’s not just unfair and dangerous for patients. It’s fraud, actually. Patients shouldn’t suffer and die because hospitals refuse to hire actual nurses to deliver the nursing care.”

In some ways, short staffing and using ancillary staff instead of nurses is the great

injustice. Nurses are railing against these problems, but it is leaders like Summers who are speaking out most vocally about them. With her platform and her ability to reach nurses and the public together, Summers can bring the issues to the uninformed, especially through calling the media on their inaccuracies.

“There could be enough nurses to provide all the care patients need if our decision makers would hire enough, but they won’t hire enough because they’re too shortsighted,” says Summers.

In essence, nursing needs better branding—and that’s exactly what The Truth About Nursing is trying to achieve.

“They act as if they don’t read the studies that show that nurses have life-saving value, so it’s injustice for the patients. They deserve real nurses to help them survive. And it’s injustice for the nurses, who deserve better working conditions than to run around for 13 or 14 hours with no break.”

What, then, is the solution to such a complex problem? How can so many disparate parts come together to over-

come this injustice? It is obviously hurting nurses—and nurses can see that it is hurting patients as well—but the public will remain in the dark unless nurses start to speak up.

Summers agrees. “I think nursing will get stronger if more nurses start speaking up and taking a stand. Since 1990, there has been a gradual but persistent attack on nursing by health care decision makers in what I call the ‘denursification of health care.’ Hospital stays were cut drastically, which took nursing care away from patients. And then

decision makers began replacing nurses with assistants, and stretching nurses as thin as possible with heavy patient loads. It’s been a gradual but ever-increasing effort to remove nursing care from patients, based on shortsighted, amoral profit motives that have the effect of harming and killing patients.”

Leaders such as Summers see these trends and are on the forefront of leading the charge. Hopefully, the change will ar-

rive before more patients are hurt, but the development of change in health care is notoriously slow, bogged down by mores and taboos that only innovative leaders with courage can overcome. More nurses are needed, and leaders such as Summers are the ones who can help patients and nurses alike.

How to Strengthen Nursing

Since her very early days in nursing, Summers' passion has been advocating for a nursing profession with more fully realized autonomy. Therefore, it should be no surprise that she sees this particular part of the nursing paradigm as key to strengthening the profession.

"Something I wish nurses would do more of is 'Nursing Out Loud,' which is speaking out loud about the assessments

tors write orders, nurses follow them, and that's the extent of the exchange.

How should nurses stake out the full force of their autonomy, though? "I think if we're going to fully embrace autonomy, we need to find better ways to protect the nurses who speak up and take a stand to protect their patients," says Summers.

She continues: "It's one of the biggest crises of our time, of our profession—that people don't treat us as autonomous professionals, because they don't know that we are college-educated, autonomous, science professionals. They try to push us around, bully us, and give us commands. 'Orders' is a word we are working to eliminate from health care vocabulary since it wrongly implies that

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they make and the symptoms they find, the various plans of action they are considering when they find a patient who needs intervention, and their thinking processes that lead them to the decisions they ultimately make," Summers explains. "If patients, families, and health care colleagues heard nurses speak out loud about their decision-making process, they would think far more highly of nurses."

These assessments and treatments are the foundation of autonomy, and the public doesn't know that nurses have it. They think that doc-

physicians are in charge of us. We encourage nurses to use 'prescriptions' instead, which does not tread on nursing's autonomy."

Unions are an option to exercise nurse autonomy, but they are flawed on many levels. "We are trying to look at it logically: How do we protect the nurses who fight for patients by speaking the truth? Unions are one good option, but only a small minority of nurses are protected by a union," Summers explains.

"When nurses advocate for patients without the protection of a union, too often they end

up victims," she adds. "When nurses are put into dangerous situations with too many patients and they make a mistake, the nurse is hung out to dry because nurses are the last in a

Hopefully, the change will arrive before more patients are hurt, but the development of change in health care is notoriously slow, bogged down by mores and taboos that only innovative leaders with courage can overcome.

long line of people who decide how care is delivered. These attacks on nurses are not just bad for nurses; they endanger patients. Nurses need the freedom to advocate for whatever is best for the patient without being in fear of losing their jobs. Adding to the problem are too many nurse managers who lack courage and sell out the nurses they manage. We nurses must stand together at the profession's edge."

In the end, we need better solutions to promote nurse autonomy, but no solutions have presented themselves to help protect nurses and patients alike. "Nurses are routinely fired and attacked by their employers for trying to protect their patients. It's a failure of the profession that this happens," says Summers. "We must find a way to protect nurses who speak up. The next time a nurse is fired by his employer for protecting a patient, I would like to see nurses from all over stage nonstop rallies in front of the offending institution, speaking to the media, articulating publicly the concept of nursing autonomy, and our duty to advocate for our patients."

The media is another way to

strengthen nursing. Watch any nighttime drama set in a hospital, and you will be appalled at how nurses are portrayed. Some shows get some aspects correct, but many don't get any correct,

show nurses as stereotypes, and routinely give credit to physicians for doing the vital work that nurses do in real life. Why does this happen?

"The Truth About Nursing focuses on media but also speaks out on issues that plague nursing, such as ratios that are further up the pyramid from our core mission. Poor ratios come from a lack of public understanding of the value of nursing that stems from poor media portrayals, which we believe is the bedrock problem of the global nursing shortage," Summers explains.

"It all comes back to people who don't understand what we do," she argues. "Research shows the media affects how people think and act toward nursing. We can reach those decision makers who fail to fully fund nursing through the media they are already watching, reading, and hearing. When decision makers see a compelling story about how nursing matters to patient health and survival in a television drama they already care about, it might make it easier to persuade them to take off their blinders and look at the myriad studies linking pa-



Sandy Summers, RN, MSN, MPH

tient outcomes to nurse-to-patient ratios.”

If the public watched a show or heard a newscast about what is really going on in the nursing world, they would be appalled, and hopefully, support the cause of nursing reform. Nursing is strengthened by accurate media portrayals because they help the public understand what exactly nurses do, persuade decision makers that nursing is far more important than nurses are given credit for, and encourage new nurs-

make their needs known. In essence, nursing needs better branding—and that’s exactly what The Truth About Nursing is trying to achieve.

How The Truth About Nursing Is Leading the Way

The Truth About Nursing is about changing what people believe about nursing, and Summers is passionate about changing the perception for all levels of the public.

“People just put nurses in these little boxes. When we began fighting media stereotypes

“I think if we’re going to fully embrace autonomy, we need to find better ways to protect the nurses who speak up and take a stand to protect their patients,” says Summers.

es to enter the profession. If nursing has a bad reputation in the public eye, they can’t

in 2001, we started writing these FAQs on our website [www.truthaboutnursing.org/faq]

to address common misperceptions or damaging assumptions or ideas about nursing. Our FAQs work to explain how the media is affecting our profession,” says Summers.

roles in health care and respect you and the profession.”

Advocacy. Autonomy. Speaking out. Changing perceptions. Summers stands for all of these and is a leader in

Nursing is strengthened by accurate media portrayals because they help the public understand what exactly nurses do, persuade decision makers that nursing is far more important than nurses are given credit for, and encourage new nurses to enter the profession.

“We built our action page [www.truthaboutnursing.org/action] as a roadmap to help nurses take command of our image and start working on ways to help the public understand the value of nursing and transform nursing to a stronger profession,” she adds. “Patients are not getting good enough health care because nursing is weakened. People don’t understand our value. With help from more nurses—and non-nurses—we can strengthen the profession, provide better care, and our patients will be more likely to survive and thrive.”

Summers encourages nurses to speak out, even if it is just to family members and friends. You have to exercise your ability to speak up for yourself if you ever hope to speak up to someone who is in control of your profession. “That’s one thing that the nurse who inspired me to become a nurse taught me. That in addition to advocating for patients and practicing with autonomy, you’ve got to speak out loud about what it is you do, so that people will come to understand our vital

the nursing world because of it. If you take away one thing from her struggles and her passions, it should be this:

“We need some serious media help to change public perception, but the media isn’t magically going to start covering nursing better on their own. We must lead the effort by reaching out to members of the media with feedback on their work, and ideas for their future work. We must create and send them press releases about our interesting and dramatic endeavors and stories; write op-eds, children’s books, and television scripts; create videos, websites, and action figures. We *can* change thinking, how the world responds to us, and our ability to strengthen care for every person on Earth. But we need your help. Please join us.” **MN**

Lynda Lampert, RN, has worked medical-surgical, telemetry, and intensive care units in her career. She has been freelancing for five years and lives in western Pennsylvania with her family and pets.