

FOR THIS RIVIER INSTRUCTOR, NURSING MATTERS

Kathy Patenaude, MS, RN, CNE, inspires the next generation of nurses

Lucie Bryar '76*
(From: *Rivier Today*, Fall 2009)

“I really believe I’m here to facilitate learning, not to feed information to my students.”
— Kathy Patenaude, MS, RN, CNE, Nursing Instructor



(PHOTO BY JODIE ANDRUSKEVICH)

In her mind’s eye, Nursing Instructor **Kathy Patenaude** can still see the Lou Gehrig’s patients** she cared for at the Veteran’s Administration back in the late 1970s. At the time, she was a young graduate nurse fresh out of Laboure College in Dorchester, MA.

“It was sad because they were fully alert, but their bodies were failing them,” says Patenaude, recalling one man who would light up when his wife and children visited, even though he was too weak to touch them. “I could see his wife trying to hold it all together, pretending things were normal.”

For the next 20-plus years, Patenaude practiced nursing in various settings, while she and her husband raised three children. But her primary love turned out to be emergency nursing. “It’s always changing, always challenging. You never know what’s going to come through the door next,” she says.

Compassion for those she treats and passion for what she does seem to define Patenaude, who has been teaching fulltime at Rivier since 2003. Her progression from V.A. nurse to emergency department nurse and eventually to the classroom has been a steady evolution. She lights up—even after 30 years in the profession—when she says, “I absolutely love teaching and nursing. I can’t imagine my life without the two.”

An Early Interest in Nursing

As a young student at Presentation of Mary Academy in Hudson, Patenaude was resolute about wanting to be four things when she grew up: a nurse, a teacher, a mother, and a nun. “I’ve accomplished three out of the four,” she says with an easy laugh.

Her choice to enter nursing felt natural. She grew up in a household where stories “from the front lines” flowed freely at the dinner table: her mother and an older sister are both nurses.

Patenaude remembers, at age nine, being allowed to delve into her mother's nursing textbooks. "At that age, I didn't understand most of them," she says, but "I was fascinated with the anatomy and physiology texts and in particular, the plastic overlays of the human body. That was it, I was hooked."

Advancing Her Education

After her early experience at the Veterans Administration, Patenaude worked for many years as a registered nurse in the emergency department at Saints Memorial Hospital in Lowell. She also held positions in rehabilitation and long term care while her children were young. "Nursing gave me a lot of flexibility to be with my family," she says.

Still, like most working mothers, she constantly juggled her professional life with the demands of her home life. "I always knew the importance of furthering my education," says Patenaude, adding that her chance to pursue an advanced degree didn't come until after nearly 20 years in the field. Even then, she had to manage her roles as wife, mother, and full-time nurse, working the 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. shift while completing her bachelor's degree at Rivier in 2000. She went on to earn a master's degree in nursing at Rivier in 2003 and last year, became one of only two nurses in the State at the time to be certified as a nurse educator by the National League for Nursing.

Inspiration for New Nurses

Even with years of experience, Patenaude gained newfound inspiration and wisdom from her nursing professors at Rivier. Dr. Grace Sullivan, RN, CS, DNSc, now retired, was key in her professional development, as was Professor Dr. Denise Baxter, Ed.D., ARNP, who served as her master's advisor.

She explains that Sullivan would use the familiar teaching maxim, "I'm the guide on the side; not the sage on the stage." Patenaude says, "At first I wondered what she meant by that, but now I fully understand."

Through the years, Patenaude realized she had a gift for teaching, a trait that her professors and colleagues also recognized and encouraged. In 2000, she answered the calling when she accepted a teaching position at the Saint Joseph School of Practical Nursing. "That job became an important part of who I am," she says.

Today, Patenaude teaches classes in nursing fundamentals, pharmacology, and medical-surgical nursing to men and women in Rivier's undergraduate nursing program. Thanks to advances in technology, the profession and patient care has changed tremendously since her early days at the Veteran's Administration.

Students can now hone their skills on "virtual patient simulators," available in the College's simulation lab. Each "Sim" patient has a pulse, heartbeat, and lung and bowel sounds, and can even provide verbal feedback about pain and discomfort.

"Back when I was a nursing student, we practiced on each other or we used static mannequins," says Patenaude. While it's easier to practice taking vital signs, or inserting IVs or catheters, there's one aspect of the profession that seems to challenge many of today's students: understanding what it feels like to be a patient.

Patenaude believes that most nursing students have the compassion and empathy necessary to succeed in the field, but many don't recognize or know they have it. "It's my job to draw it out," she says.

Her teaching philosophy goes back to the words of professor and mentor Dr. Grace Sullivan. "I really believe I'm here to facilitate learning, not to feed information to my students," she says. "I tell

students, ‘I expect 100 percent from you and I expect 100 percent from me. They need to be engaged in the learning process.’ Occasionally students get frustrated when she turns one of their questions around and asks, ‘What do you think?’

At the same time, her biggest rewards come from students’ successes. ‘When they come back after graduation and tell us about their accomplishments – the jobs they’ve landed, the people they’ve worked with, and the dreams they’ve realized—that’s the best,’ she beams. ■

* **LUCIE BRYAR** earned a B.A. in English Communications from Rivier College in 1976. She has more than 20 years experience in news-writing, marketing, and public relations, including 14 years as a staff writer for Rivier College. In her current position as a writer for Southern New Hampshire Medical Center, Bryar produces the employee newsletter. She also writes for the hospital magazine, as well as contributes to the production of collateral marketing material.

** *Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis is commonly known as Lou Gehrig’s disease.*