

DUSON Alumni

Duke University School of Nursing alumni are a diverse group of individuals whose reasons for going to nursing school are as varied as the alumni themselves. Their careers also reflect this diversity. No matter if they are caring for patients by the bedside, leading research initiatives at academic medical centers or developing innovations at start-up companies, DUSON alumni are changing lives and transforming medicine here at home and around the world.

Here are just a few alumni who have found success in a variety of careers thanks to the skills they gained while studying at DUSON.

LEADING CHANGE

by Aliza Inbari and Bernadette Gillis

Kevin Sowers, RN, MSN'89, initially didn't set out to work in health care leadership positions. As an undergraduate student, he planned to major in music. An epiphany while working during summers taking care of residents in a nursing home led him to realize his calling. So, he changed his major and set his sights on becoming a nurse. Little did he know at the time that he would go on to make a difference in the lives of generations of people through his work as a leader at two of the country's top academic medical centers.

In February 2018, Sowers became president of the Johns Hopkins Health System and executive vice president of Johns Hopkins Medicine, after having spent 32 years at Duke, the last eight as president and CEO of Duke University Hospital.

"I did not become a nurse to become the president of the Johns Hopkins Health System," Sowers said. "When I became a nurse, nurses could not become presidents of health systems or even hospitals—it was not even common for a man to become a nurse."

Sowers grew up below the poverty line on a farm in rural Ohio, and was the first in his family to attend college. To help cover the costs, he worked as a music therapist at a county nursing home in the mornings and as an orderly at nights, bathing nursing home residents and putting them to bed. "It was in those summer months I really found my passion for caring for human beings," he said.

In 1985 Sowers began his career at Duke as an oncology nurse. He credits Duke University School of Nursing with helping him hone his skills as a leader. "I was in one of the first classes that focused on developing clinical nurse specialists, especially clinical nurse specialists in oncology," said Sowers, who earned a master of science in nursing degree from Duke in 1989. "The School supported me in being innovative and thinking through my career."

He went on to become associate vice president of Duke University Health System, interim CEO for Duke Regional Hospital and chief

Sowers Makes
His Mark
as a Leader in
Health Care





A Nursing Scientist in Pharmaceuticals

operating officer at Duke University Hospital before being named president in 2009. He was the driving force behind organizational initiatives to improve clinical quality, patient satisfaction, work culture and finance.

A true believer that an organization is “only as successful as the people,” Sowers approached every conversation and encounter with Duke employees, physicians, nurses, patients and their families as a learning experience. He is taking a similar approach to his role at Johns Hopkins.

“The phrase that I was best known for at Duke was, ‘Teach me something,’” he said. “As a leader, that’s an invitation for members of your team to tell you what you need to know. We should encourage open, honest dialogue, and make an effort to connect with people. In fact, my first 100 days at Johns Hopkins were dedicated to listening.”

Sowers currently oversees a system of six hospitals in Maryland, Washington, D.C. and Florida. He also serves as chair of Johns Hopkins Community Physicians, which has more than 40 primary and specialty care outpatient sites throughout Maryland and the Washington, D.C., area. With oversight at the intersection of patient care, research and education, he is leading the planning process for a new strategic plan and operating model for Johns Hopkins Medicine for the next five to ten years. He also hopes to advance Johns Hopkins Medicine’s diversity and inclusion efforts.

From a very young age, **Heather Smith, PhD’12, MSN’07**, wanted to be a nurse. Her cousin, Mark, was born with osteogenesis imperfecta, a genetic disorder that affects the bones and makes them break easily, and he passed away of sudden infant death syndrome when he was six months old. “I remember my mother saying to me, ‘You could be a nurse and take care of babies like Mark.’”

Smith fulfilled her dream of becoming a nurse and spent several years working in neonatal intensive care units in California, Ohio and Virginia. To increase her expertise and scope of responsibility, she completed a master of science in nursing (MSN) degree from Duke University School of Nursing to become a neonatal nurse practitioner and a clinical nurse specialist.

But that is when her passion for nursing and helping others took a different turn.

Upon completion of her MSN, she applied to the PhD in nursing program at Duke. She was admitted in 2007, just one year after the program first launched. “My cohort was four people, the maximum that Duke accepted at the time, and I considered them family,” she said. “I felt supported. My mentors Dr. Diane Holditch-Davis and Dr. Deb Brandon pushed me to be a better writer, researcher, critical thinker and a better nurse.”

While in the program, Smith realized that her true passion was in nursing research. She studied the development of cerebral oxygenation in premature infants and wanted to apply her nursing skills and PhD education in the medical care industry. She applied for jobs in the Research Triangle Park and after sending multiple applications, she received a rejection email from a company called QQL Medical,