You’ve Come A Long Way…

Duke Wins National Award as Best Nursing School for Men

By Jim Rogalski

For the 1970 graduation capping ceremony, the Duke University School of Nursing (DUSON) faculty faced a dilemma with two of its students: Donning them with traditional nurse’s caps was simply out of the question. So when Roger Voelkel, BSN’70, and Don Brown, BSN’70—who both had come to Duke in 1966 via the U.S. Navy Enlisted Nursing Education Program—crossed the stage dressed in their crisp Navy whites, interim dean Ann Jacobansky, RN, placed a Duke pin on their respective lapels instead of a cap on their heads.

By earning their nursing degrees, the school’s first two male students helped to pave the way for generations of men who would follow.

“The school took a bold step by admitting us,” said Voelkel. “Times were different then, and it was uncommon for men to be nurses. It was not unusual for men who wanted to do so to be perceived as strange.”

Not so much today.

Lured by the chance to have an impact on the lives of others as well as copious opportunities in a multitude of specialties, a robust job market, and flexible work schedules, more men are entering the nursing field each year. Just a few years ago men made up 4.5 percent of the licensed nursing workforce. Today it is 6 percent and growing. Enrollment by men in pre-licensure programs is even higher.

“More men are realizing the many opportunities that exist within the nursing profession,” said John Brion, PhD, RN, an assistant professor in the Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing (ABSN) degree program. “And the opportunity to become a nurse practitioner or certified nurse anesthetist with the potential to have greater autonomy seems to be particularly appealing to men.”

Since the Voelkel and Brown era at DUSON, the School of Nursing has worked steadily to recruit more men into nursing and make Duke a welcoming place for them. Those efforts culminated this fall when the school received a 2010 Best Nursing School/College for Men in Nursing Award from the American Assembly for Men in Nursing (AAMN). The association cited Duke’s success at recruiting and retaining male students and faculty and coordinating networking and community service activities that foster a supportive environment for men in nursing.

A full third of Duke’s core nursing teaching faculty—four out of 12—are men.

“The award is really an honor,” Brion said, “because it speaks to the commitment the school…"
has to making sure we have a diverse student body and a more diverse nursing workforce.”

The Duke chapter of AAMN—nicknamed DAAMN—hosts events that include informal cookouts and pizza parties, volunteer landscaping at a local homeless shelter, blood drives, and a night at a Durham Bulls game.

ABSN student Brian Gammon, the student chair of DAAMN, said the social gatherings are valuable because they give male students the opportunity to talk about what’s going on in school. The faculty, he said, “take time out of their day to meet with us outside of class. They treat us like colleagues even though we’re students.”

According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), 10.8 percent of nursing students in baccalaureate nursing programs nationwide are male; at Duke it’s 14.8 percent. The AACN says the national average for men in master’s programs is 9.1 percent; it’s 13.09 percent at Duke. Duke boasts a 20 percent male enrollment rate for research-focused doctoral nursing programs, which is nearly triple the national average of 7.3 percent. And 16.92 percent of Duke’s practice-focused doctoral nursing students are male, which is double the national average of 8.1 percent.

Ruby L. Wilson, EdD’69, RN, FAAN, dean from 1971 to 1984, said only a couple of tweaks were needed once the school began admitting men.

“Of course we had different uniforms made for them because they didn’t wear skirts. And we had to make different living arrangements,” Wilson said.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, nursing students lived in Hanes House, but it was inappropriate to house the male students there, she said. Since West Campus was so far from the nursing school, the male students were housed across the street in the graduate center.

John Ringland, BSN’78, lived off campus. He transferred from Trinity into the nursing program during his sophomore year and was the only male in his class of 100. He said he “was treated like everyone else. I didn’t get any special treatment. I remember going to OB rotation in delivery and my professor never stopped me from doing anything.”

He said that, “like women surgeons having to work harder to gain respect, I had to do at least as well or better than the female students. Today, in general, nursing is a much more respected profession than it was 30 years ago.”

Robert Sigety, BSN’80, said he remembers “getting a few comments from doctors about why I wanted to be a nurse, but not anything mean. I was treated very well and had good relationships.”

At a recent pizza gathering at the School of Nursing café, current male students talked about the importance of gender diversity in the nursing workforce, what appeals to them about the profession, and their experiences so far.

Uche Okam said that during his maternity clinic rotation he was assigned to a young woman in labor who “was not very receptive to having a male student, and I could understand that. So I was assigned to another patient.”

Okam said he had always been interested in the medical profession but was uncertain about which field to choose. He pursued research and pharmacology for a short while but eventually realized he wanted to work one-on-one with patients.

“The field of nursing is very broad,” he said, “and has a lot of opportunities. This is a starting point to greater things the field has to offer.”

He plans to eventually become a family nurse practitioner and manage his own practice.

Abdur Akbar also came from a research background but was drawn to nursing after “working alongside them and seeing the impact they have and the level of responsibility they are given.”

Ryan Shaw, a PhD student, said a number of friends and family members asked if he is planning to become a doctor.

“The general public has a misconception that nursing is a bridge to becoming a doctor,” Shaw said. “But in truth, the two are very separate professions.”

Omar Hasan came from a law enforcement background, where he enjoyed the flexible schedule and hands-on work. He prefers nursing because “you’re taking someone who’s sick and trying to problem solve and improve the quality of their life.”

Adds Brion: “The really impressive thing about all of our students is that most have had successful careers in other fields but have been drawn to nursing out of a desire to make a difference in the lives of other people.”