Advocates, mentors, cheerleaders, advisors — in the span of one shift, Pennsylvania Hospital’s nurses can fill all of these roles. Even in the toughest times, these unparalleled professionals can balance clinical responsibilities, research projects, and community service, all while serving as a beacon of hope for patients. This spring, nurses across the health system recognized these colleagues’ commitment to elevating nursing practices and caring for the whole patient during the 21st Annual Penn Medicine Nursing Clinical Excellence Awards.

“...we are my guardian angels. Because of you, we are going to continue to grow, advance science, and take care of patients.”

This year, five exemplary nurses from PAH were celebrated for their extensive clinical contributions, promotion of education and research, and invaluable impact on patients and the community.

Florence Vaneck, MSN, RN, NE-BC, director of Nursing Education, Nursing Professional Practice, and the Magnet Program, earned this year’s Victoria L. Rich Transformational Leadership Award in recognition of her ability to lead by example, bring out the best in her peers, and drive changes that improve both the patient experience and workplace. Vaneck has become a leader, mentor, and advisor for colleagues at all levels. By asking questions, applying her broad expertise, and consistently taking initiative, she has made crucial contributions to projects ranging from age-friendly care initiatives for geriatric patients to the hospital’s successful Magnet re-designation. Vaneck has also played a vital part in promoting respect and professionalism by developing the PAH Workplace Incivility Guidelines and the Guidelines for a Respectful Workplace Algorithm. As her nomination noted, “Above all, it is her honor and character that make her shine as a leader at PAH.”

Like Vaneck, Ann Coughlin, MSN, RN, CMSRN, CBL — the winner of this year’s Dianne Lathum Award for Leadership — continuously finds new ways to create a better environment for patients and staff alike. A charge nurse on 5 Cathcart, she has established herself as a strong clinical leader, a knowledgeable preceptor, and an inspiring advocate for nursing students. She also created the first local American Medical Surgical Nurses chapter to connect nurses across Philadelphia and the surrounding counties. Coughlin is especially invested in reducing nurse burnout. She has organized anxiety reduction initiatives and led therapeutic coloring research that showed a significant reduction in nurse anxiety; the study has been presented both locally and nationally. She also helped lead a falls reduction initiative that led to an 83 percent reduction in the rate of patient falls on 5 Cathcart.

Amomarie Deeley, MSN, RNC-NIC, CNL, a nurse in the Intensive Care Nursery, was selected to serve on an association committee to create evidence-based practice guidelines for ICNs. She was also recently elected to serve as the education director for the Delaware Valley Association of Neonatal Nurses chapter. In this position, she will connect more than 300 local neonatal nurses to educational and research supports.

This year, the Lillian Brunner Award for Exemplary Practice was presented to Vascular Access Team (VAT) nurse Anna Wojtas, MSN, RN, CCRN. She serves as the co-chair of the Nursing Practice Council and is an active member of the Committee to Reduce Blood Stream Infections. With her strong drive, enthusiasm, and collaborative spirit, she has helped expand the skills of both her VAT peers and other nurses. Wojtas has also enhanced nursing practices and improved patient outcomes through several projects. For example, she helped expand the capacity of the VAT to place peripherally inserted central catheter (PICC lines) at the bedside. With additional staff and equipment, the VAT has inserted more than 200 bedside PICC lines since April 2020, resulting in decreased lengths of stay, increased patient satisfaction, and reduced costs.

Finally, Delivery Room nurse Rhonda Whitaker, BSN, RN, CBC, received the Roselyn J. Watt Award for Community/Patient/Family Relationships. Known for her warmth and collegiality, she is passionate about supporting families that have experienced a perinatal loss, and she is an excellent resource for other nurses hoping to provide more empathetic care to this population. As chair of the Bereavement Committee, she has spearheaded multiple projects, including creating a bereavement packet for patients and distributing blankets to families experiencing loss at PAH and other hospitals. Additionally, she assumes responsibility for reaching out to grieving families after discharge to provide additional care and support. Whitaker is also involved in several community outreach initiatives and was granted Penn Medicine CAREs funding to host community health fairs.
In alignment with the system-wide goals of the Office of Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity’s ACT plan, the Community workgroup is focusing on building strong partnerships with neighborhood leaders, promoting fair policing and security practices, and creating a healthy, bias-free community that is enhanced and supported by PAH’s work and presence. Patient Services Associate Craig Hargrove volunteered to chair the workgroup.

What motivated you to take on this role?

Last June, after George Floyd was killed, staff assembled to share how we felt and to reflect on our experiences. Pennsylvania Hospital is a great place to work, but there has been a sense of unease about conversations about race. When these workgroups were formed, and I was selected for the Community group, I realized that serving as the chair offered me a good platform to represent my coworkers and speak openly about our concerns. I’ve been here for 27 years, so clearly there’s something keeping me here! I’ve expanded my education and achieved my MBA, and now I want to encourage others to aspire to more — for themselves and for our community.

What are some of the goals that your group has identified?

We’ve been examining things like retention, promotions, and giving staff opportunities to successfully move up the ranks to build a stronger hospital community. We’ve also discussed how to create relationships with groups outside of the hospital. We want to share information about opportunities with students at our local schools so they know that they can pursue a career in medicine right in their own neighborhood. We want to work with community centers, civic groups, and churches to determine how we can best support people in need. We want to connect with the local police precinct and open up a dialogue about bridging communication gaps and removing bias. We’re eager to get these plans in motion over the next few months.

What value do you see in this work?

I know firsthand that if you work hard, you can achieve your goals. I believe that we have a real opportunity to initiate sustainable, long-term change, and I’m excited and honored to be a part of this project. Together, we can create a community that’s supportive, respectful, and just. At the first Steering Committee meeting, I noticed that all of our workgroups are already in alignment. Right away, my perception was that there be cross-pollinations between groups, which will give us the tools for success.

Chat with the Chair: COMMUNITY

VANTAGE

Theresa Larivee, Chief Executive Officer

Last month, I met with the chairs of Pennsylvania Hospital’s diversity, inclusion, and equity workgroups for the first time. The groups have been crafting new initiatives across the six areas identified by the Action for Cultural Transformation (ACT) plan — culture, people, clinical, research, education, and community — and the inaugural Steering Committee meeting was enlightening and encouraging. As the workgroup chairs shared their teams’ ambitious goals, it quickly became evident that every employee participating in this work truly appreciates that our focus isn’t lip service or easy fixes, but fundamentally transforming our culture.

There is still much to accomplish, but PAH has already come so far. Last summer, individuals voiced their concerns that we couldn’t maintain the momentum and antiracist change wouldn’t come. One year on, dozens of staff are meeting regularly to identify obstacles to progress and opportunities for change. I am deeply grateful for the leadership of our workgroup chairs, sponsors, and members, and I look forward to translating their insightful ideas into impactful actions.

Since 1992, the United States has designated May as Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month. The month offers the opportunity to recognize Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Native Hawaiians who have enriched our history, while also shining a light on the challenges they face. This year, it feels especially urgent to support the AAPI community following a surge in anti-Asian hate crimes. To amplify the voices and highlight the achievements of AAPI staff and community members, PAH’s Cultural & Community Awareness Council (CCAC) organized a month-long celebration.

AAPI Month 2021: Successes, Struggles, and Stories

The highlight of the month, though, came in the form of personal stories that many AAPI staff shared about their connections to their heritage. For example, Cindy Nguyen, BSN, RN, a nurse in the ICU and a first-generation Vietnamese-American, wrote, “I always knew I wanted to have a career that would benefit the Vietnamese community while caring for others. Being bilingual has allowed me to connect with Vietnamese patients, whether as a primary nurse or a resource for a fellow coworker.” Similarly, her husband, Michael Chau, BSN, RN, a nurse on 4 Spruce and a first-generation Chinese-American, was drawn to behavioral health nursing because he wanted to fight the stigma attached to mental health struggles among many Asian-American communities. His unique perspective and fluency in Cantonese have “allowed him to build a rapport with Chinese patients whom others may not have been able to connect with.”

Sara Keiako Cohen, MSN, RN, offered a glimpse into the family history behind her Hawaiian middle name; Filipino ICN nurse Edelyn Ebora, RN, wrote about what inspired her to follow her mother’s and grandmother’s footsteps and Vietnamese-American ED nurse Van Nguyen, RN, shared a photo (below) of her parents dropping off gloves and masks to support PENN at the beginning of the pandemic.

To read these and other staff stories, visit the PAH Intranet site.