

# Meet the Millennials: A New Generation of Nursing Leaders

BY VIRGINIA ST-DENIS

**T**he second day of the CNA biennial convention kicked off with a focus on the changing demographics of the nursing workforce and the needs of the millennials.

Nanos Research chairman Nik Nanos opened the day, sharing polling data that shows millennials are focused on staying fit, maintaining wellness, improving themselves, and working peer-to-peer; they also question authority. They want to be engaged — to be able to ask and be asked questions to receive and provide feedback. Nanos said cultural changes in the nursing workplace will come because millennials want to have flexible work hours. (For more on Nanos's presentation, see "Ready to Embrace the Future?" in the April issue.)

His presentation was followed by a Meet the Millennials panel, moderated by Sheri Price. The Dalhousie University nursing professor and scientist at IWK Health Centre in Halifax said she had been discouraged from researching millennials because the results could pigeonhole that generation. However, her research and Nanos's comments at the start of the day confirmed to her that as part of generation X, she was not that different from millennials.

"I would hear people say things like 'Oh, they want feedback' and 'They want to be told that they did a good job.' Well, actually, *I* would like to be told I did a good job. I don't have tenure. If you think I did a good job, I would like to hear it," Price told a laughing audience. Treating people well and providing feedback, good or bad, is free and can make a big difference in the workplace and the health-care system.

While teaching fourth-year students, she would tell the soon-to-graduate millennials of her various experiences. Looking back, she says she may have been too much of a cheerleader for nursing, as her students would sometimes return to see her months after, disappointed and discouraged. Price said she decided to research the cohort to better understand what they wanted and needed to keep them in the profession.

"If they feel they are working in an area where they are not able to do the things they came to nursing to do — to make a difference, make an impact, affect patient and

population health — then they will move on to someplace where the system will enable them to do that."

The research Price completed for the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions focused on the similarities the millennials have with earlier generations, which she hoped would bring the profession together rather than pigeonhole the younger generation. She turned her research into BeANurse.ca, a campaign to improve recruitment and retention of this generation. She knew the campaign was successful when older nurses cried while watching the vignettes, feeling a connection to this new generation and feeling confident in millennials' ability to be the next nursing leaders.

Price said she wanted to take the opportunity at the CNA biennial convention to introduce some of the inspirational millennial nursing leaders.

**Margaret Danko:**  
"I work with a highly supportive team that pushes me to be a better nurse every day"

Mentorship was a recurring theme in the presentations of the four millennials on the panel, including Margaret Danko, an RN in the cardiovascular intensive care unit at the Mazankowski Alberta Heart Institute. She received mentorship not only while

attending the University of Alberta's (U of A) bachelor of nursing honours program but also while serving in several leadership roles with the Canadian Nursing Students' Association and on the CNA board.

"Over the course of my four-year degree, I was very fortunate to have some incredible experiences with the CNSA," Danko said, including attending conferences across the country, representing the U of A at CNSA's national assembly and serving on the board of directors as a regional director, president and past president. "Not only did I make some lifelong friends and connections with people who still mentor me today, I learned more about nursing, health care and leadership than could ever be taught in the classroom."

Along with working with peer mentors through CNSA, Danko had opportunities to work with nurses in

government and professional associations, colleges and unions. As CNSA's president, Danko represented 30,000 students on the CNA board. She said CNA board members welcomed her as a colleague and a peer, taught her and included her in discussions.

After gaining more clinical experience, Danko plans to pursue graduate studies. For now, she said, she is happy working in a unit that offers educational opportunities for new skills and recertification. "I love that I learn and grow as an RN every single day at work," she said. "I work with a highly supportive team that pushes me to be a better nurse every day and has made my transition from student to new grad a very positive experience."

Having graduated in 2013, Danko is now a mentor for a fourth-year preceptorship student. She often reflects on her own preceptorship experience and said she hopes to be the same kind of mentor to her student.

"So, what can you do to support new grads?" Danko asked the convention attendees. "Tell us your nursing story. We want to know why you are a nurse and what inspires you...Take the time to get to know your new grad colleagues and hear their nursing stories. Keep providing examples of the diversity of paths that nursing can lead to and encouraging us to find our passion and follow it."

An RN and operations manager of the neonatal intensive care unit at the IWK, Braden Davie said his first

mentor was a friend's mother. She would go to his house after her shift, wearing peach-coloured scrubs, to see if he and his sister would like to go to her farm for supper. He knew her as a beautiful person with a warm smile who took care of people when they were sick. Other than that, Davie didn't know much about nursing until he started to explore it as a career in high school. He would sit and talk with her about her experiences for hours. "I wanted to know what it was like to take care of someone after they had been in a car accident or what a nurse had to do when a woman presented to the hospital in labour," he recalls. "I expected her to talk about heroic and high-tech interventions, but her responses always emphasized the privilege it was to be with people when they were vulnerable."

She ignited a passion in Davie that was still evident on stage. "I am so excited for what the rest of my career has in store for me, and I will always remain thankful for those who have helped me the first few years of my career," he said. "When I left Saskatoon to move to Halifax four years ago, a colleague of mine told me that in a couple of years I would not feel the same way about nursing — and she was right. Today, I *don't* feel the same way about nursing. If it is possible, I love nursing today more than the first time I put on my RN pin."

Having the opportunity to share his passion with hundreds of bright and energetic nursing students through CNSA instilled confidence in him that he made the right career choice.

"If I had one piece of advice for nursing students today, I would encourage them to get involved in their profession early. I would also encourage them to build a network of colleagues who share the same love of nursing as they do."

**Dawn Tisdale:**  
**"I fell in love so hard with nursing and so fast. I truly felt I found my calling"**

While Davie wanted to be a nurse before he started school, Dawn Tisdale said she never intended to be a nurse. "As an altruistic person with a compassionate heart and a strong sense of social justice, everyone who has known me since the day I was

born has encouraged me to become a nurse. My pre-school teacher told my mom that I was destined to be a nurse. My guidance counsellor in high school said that my career test said all signs point to nursing. All of my friends and family told me I would make an excellent nurse. Every time, I would politely smile and think to myself 'I would *never* be a nurse,'" Tisdale said, to laughter from the audience.



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**Braden Davie: "I never want to forget how good it feels to put on my RN pin every morning."**

The media showed her a negative stereotype of the profession. She did not think a career in nursing would be challenging enough or allow her to effect change. However, she was convinced to have coffee and chat with a friend's sister-in-law, who was a nurse. Tisdale said the conversation was eye-opening for her, so she enrolled in the nursing program at North Island College in B.C. despite having low expectations.

"On the very first day, I had my socks blown off. I fell in love so hard with nursing and so fast. I truly felt I found my calling, my soulmate, and was instantly enchanted with this beautiful profession," she said. "How could I not be excited? This profession has everything. It's challenging, diverse, entrenched in values of compassion and ethics, and working from the heart, and every day you have the privilege to support people on their health journey."

Looking back on the day before she started class, Tisdale said she told her husband that school would be strictly business: she would do her school work; there would be no committees, no extracurricular activities; she was getting in and she was getting out. But that was not to be. She joined everything: North Island College's Global Learning Initiative, the Association of Registered Nurses of British Columbia (ARNBC) and the Aboriginal Nurses Association of Canada — "all of which ignited my love of leadership and supported me on my journey."

Tisdale helped start a CNSA chapter at her school, which led to her attending her first national conference where she was elected director of bilingualism and translation. The next year, she was elected president. "As president, I had the utmost honour of representing nursing students on the CNA board of directors this past year and it has been a true highlight of my life and inspired me beyond words," she said, trying not to cry.

She credits three things for her success, starting with her school environment. "My department chair, Jan Meiers...took every opportunity to lift me up and give me the space to take on these tremendous roles."

Indigenous leaders guided Tisdale in honouring her culture and discovering how her Mi'kmaq ancestry would help define her as a nurse.

"The third component of my success is that so many associations, unions and regulatory bodies are creating space for nursing students to develop their leadership skills, from creating seats on their boards of directors to bringing students to conferences to being innovative in how they engage nursing students."

Melissa Nuttall also discussed her experience of attending her first CNSA conference and being "hooked" on the work that professional associations do. Having served as the western regional director of CNSA in 2013, she is now the Vancouver Island regional director for ARNBC.

**Melissa Nuttall:  
"If there is some way we can work to combat absenteeism and create a sustainable healthy work environment, that is certainly something I would like to see in my career"**

Nuttall graduated from the University of Victoria in 2013 and completed her emergency specialization at the British Columbia Institute of Technology. She has worked in an emergency department and in post-anesthetic and cardiac short-stay care units. Through her work and through an environmental scan she completed, she has seen many positive aspects of her career choice and noticed system inefficiencies that nurses are facing daily.

According to Statistics Canada, Nuttall said, about 45 per cent of B.C. nurses work a mixture of days and nights, which the International Agency for Research on Cancer classified as a possible carcinogen. "This is really something we have to look at when we're looking at the sustainability and the health of our nursing workforce," Nuttall said. "We know that shift work has an increased risk of obesity, diabetes and heart disease and affects our mental health and well-being."

While the health-care system will not be able to stop providing 24/7 care, Nuttall said workplaces can provide more resources to help shift workers, including access to registered dietitians and sleep consultants, as well as subsidized exercise programs or fitness facilities on site. Flexibility in shifts and schedules can optimize work-life balance and job satisfaction. One innovation is self-scheduling, which allows nurses to choose their hours. "Self-scheduling has been shown to improve staff morale, increase the staff's sense of control, decrease turnover and create a more positive work environment," Nuttall said. Allowing for a mix of eight- and 12-hour shifts would also support a work-life balance.

"Our Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions estimates that nurse absenteeism costs the health industry \$743 million a year," Nuttall said. "If there is some way we can work to combat absenteeism and create a sustainable healthy work environment, that is certainly something I would like to see in my career."

Nuttall also advocates for improved access to health services, including more use of nurse practitioners, and the eradication of hallway nursing, which she said does not allow for dignified, private and safe care of patients. ■