

By Patrick
Hickey

Reaching the Top: Nursing

Patrick Hickey is the first nurse to climb all of the world's Seven Summits. Here he talks about those journeys and his journey into nursing.



A man with a beard, wearing a dark cap and sunglasses, is smiling in the foreground. He is standing in a vast, snowy mountain landscape. In the background, there are jagged, snow-capped mountain peaks under a clear blue sky. The text "and the Seven Summits" is overlaid in a large, dark, serif font across the middle of the image.

and the Seven Summits

How it came about – how it used to be

All of us became nurses for different reasons. Many have had family members that were nurses or in the medical profession, had experiences with relatives who were sick and were lovingly cared for by a nurse, and others were influenced by a family member or friend. My entry into nursing was on the recommendation of a guidance counselor in high school that suggested I pursue nursing. I was the oldest of eight boys and one girl and lived on a farm in rural Ontario, Canada. With graduation from high school looming in front of me I had no idea what I wanted to do — nursing was not even a consideration. I had never been in a hospital, had no interaction with anyone in the medical field, and had no idea if I had any of those qualities that are the foundation of nurses.

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Catholic priest; however, that meant church every Saturday night and Sunday morning and I didn't think that I could commit to that hectic schedule! My Dad would have been happy if I had taken over the farm as we had a lot of cattle and much potential for growth, but I had asthma and allergies that caused me all kinds of problems when working in the barn! When my guidance counselor suggested nursing, it came as a shock!

Why did she think I should become a nurse, and what did she know about me that I did not already know myself?! Why did she suggest nursing? I was actually insulted and hurt when she suggested this profession! At the time, I perceived it as a

blow to my manhood! After all, I was 18 years old — as insecure as most 18 year olds are — and someone I didn't know very well had suggested nursing as a career! Her other recommendations were child care worker (unlikely, as I didn't like kids), prison worker (hate being locked up), and behavioral counselor (how could I do that when I was so poorly behaved myself?).

At her suggestion I went to hear a college representative speak on the value of a nursing career. Needless to say, I was the only man in the room! But everything that representative said was pretty cool, and I actually left that room with a different impression of nursing. I remembered that they said it was a caring profession and that you would help the sick to become better and enable them to live a longer life. “Wow,” I thought, “An opportunity to help people to live longer — this must be a miracle profession! I thought only doctors had that power!”

I remember going home that day and telling my parents that I wanted to be a nurse. Mom was extremely happy as she felt it was in line with her priesthood wishes (sacrifice, poverty, servitude), but Dad was not happy! He basically said that no damn son of his would ever become a nurse and stormed out of the room. Maybe I could help “nurse” the crops?

Mentorship is Key

As I reflect on how I came into nursing over 30 years ago, I am powerfully reminded of what an effect teachers and educators can have on others. It was a teacher who saw that I had what it took to be a nurse, and



I have always appreciated her faith in me. Rachel (Mrs. Lamb — the guidance counselor) has since died from cancer, but I keep in contact with her daughter who lives very close to my home town in Canada.

Now, I am the teacher who has the opportunity to shape lives and train our youth to be the best that they can be. Who would have thought that I would now be a Clinical Assistant Professor in a College of Nursing? I struggled through the nursing program at St. Lawrence College in Brockville, Ontario Canada. I was away from home, I was still unsure of my potential, and I probably partied a little too much which took me away from my studies. Somehow I mustered the courage to approach one of my clinical instructors and told her I was fearful of failing the program. I told my instructor that I felt I had made an enormous mistake and that perhaps I was not meant to be a nurse. Up until that point, I had taken the easiest patient assignments — they had one or two medications and were probably to be discharged soon. Additionally, I was always overwhelmed by the course content and I constantly found myself reading, writing, and preparing for class while other students were enjoying the extra curricular activities of college life. I'll never forget that day with my instructor — she took the time to talk with me and basically said that I was not challenging myself enough, and that she knew I had the potential to do well, but was not applying myself as I should. My instructor wanted me to excel and decided to challenge me by assigning me the most complicated patients! I wondered whether I had made yet another mistake — would I sink or swim? In the end, I survived and was a better person for it!



Traveling and Learning

Those two people had a significant effect on my life, and both were teachers! Yet another educator had an amazing impact on my life — before graduating high school I had a geography teacher that made the world come alive! I was captivated by the lessons and stories and could see myself globe trotting around the world visiting exotic places and discovering areas never seen before. My first chance at this dream was a high school trip to Greece. My family was poor and there was no way they

could pay for the trip, so I started working two jobs in addition to school and work on the farm. I worked at a gas station pumping gas and bagging groceries, and I also worked in the local Catholic nun's convent where I did cleaning. I was able to raise the funds for the trip and traveled to Greece with high school friends. My life would forever change as those geography lessons in high school had now become a reality, and the reality was that I enjoyed foreign travel and adventure.



The list of successful summits is as follows:

- 2001 – Mt. Aconcagua, Argentina
- 2002 – Mt. Kilimanjaro, Tanzania, Africa
- 2003 – Mt. McKinley, Alaska
- 2004 – Mt. Elbrus, Russia
- 2005 – Carstenz Pyramid, Indonesia
- 2006 – Mt. Vinson, Antarctica
- 2007 – Mt. Everest, Nepal

My travel to Greece was 57 countries ago as my wife, Carol, and I have shared this common love of travel and adventure for the past 25 years. This love has also taken me down paths that I would never have imagined as I have been able to combine my nursing experience and travel to better the lives of those in other countries. For the past 18 years I have been involved in an organization, Partners of the Americas, where I have been able to send multiple shipments of medical supplies to Colombia, South America.

Additionally, it was a year long trip through Latin America that helped me to decide that my doctoral dissertation would focus on the barriers that Hispanics face when trying to access healthcare.

I took another step that would forever change my life on that trip. I stepped onto the top of Mt. Cotopaxi, a 20,000 ft. mountain near Quito, Ecuador. A chance encounter with a group of mountain climbers took me into a world that

I had never fathomed. Who would have thought that I could summit a 20,000 ft. mountain? I remember being challenged with asthma when I was young and cautioned against running and going outside when it was cold for fear of an attack, but was this not inviting an attack? Surely the cold, crisp air would cause me to stop before I got too far, and too high? What about the acrophobia? My fear of heights is so severe that I get nauseated looking out the windows of high office buildings and feel like I want to jump off tall buildings if touched by other people and I'm not suicidal! But I made it! And I was hooked!

Since that summit of Mt. Cotopaxi in 1993, I have climbed many volcanoes, frequently visit Colorado's "fourteeners" – the name for the 54 peaks in the Colorado Rockies over 14,000 feet – and challenged myself on Washington State's Mt. Rainier. After these training runs I was ready for another challenge, that of the Seven Summits of the

World. The Seven Summits are the highest mountains on each of the seven continents. Even though they vary in height, each has its own logistical challenges associated with access, weather, politics, and of course costs. I set out in 2001 to conquer this "holy grail" of mountaineering and on May 24, 2007, I was successful in my completion of this quest when I stood on top of the world at the summit of Mt. Everest.

Climbing in Nursing

My nursing career has been just as exciting as climbing mountains as I have had many challenges, met many people, and saved many lives. I "earned my wings" as a new RN by working on a Medical-Surgical floor, and then transferred to a Coronary Care Unit, followed by many years in the Emergency Room of a level one trauma center. It was here that I grew up and became a real nurse — I held the hands of dying patients, brought relief to those in pain, and delivered new lives into the world. I transitioned to the peri-operative setting where I spent twelve years moving from a staff role to manager and then educator. My next big move was into management as I assumed a Director role and was able to see the inner workings of a hospital ... the good, bad, and ugly!

So how did my life become a combination of nursing, mountain climbing and adventure? All my life I have known that I am a little different (in a good way) and it seems that I have always taken on challenges that pushed me outside of my comfort zone. I struggled consistently throughout school as nothing ever came easy to me. However, I have persevered and persisted and have gained much more confidence for doing so. I feel that I am in a much better position in life for having pushed myself, and hope that I can now help others (students) to see their potential.

I have taken advantage of my completion of the Seven Summits to bring attention to the nursing shortage and the challenges that exist with the shortage of nursing faculty. I have also joined an elite group of less than 150 people in the world that have accomplished this feat, and became the first nurse in the world to do so. I am hopeful that my example of commitment, goal-setting, and determination can help influence a student

to persist in their chosen profession. The similarities between nurses and mountain climbers are very easy to see as both have strong communication skills, work well in teams, have safety as a priority, and deal in life and death situations.

During my past two years as faculty at the University of South Carolina College of Nursing, I have seen the challenges that students endure as they juggle heavy school schedules, work schedules, and attempts to fit in family and friends. In recognition of my completion of the 7 Summits, the University of South Carolina College of Nursing has established the Summit Scholarship for student nurses. My goal is to collect \$29,035.00 — one dollar for each foot of altitude of Mt. Everest, the highest mountain in the world. Our hope is to be able to award additional financial resources to students that will enable them to focus on their studies and not have to worry about working job(s) to make ends meet.

I now keep a piece of rock from the top of Mt. Everest on my desk at school to remind me of two very important things: the great potential that all of us have within us to do anything that we set out to do, and more importantly, the great responsibility that I have as faculty to find that potential in my students. My motto has always been, “If I can do it, you can do it too,” and I am hopeful that my climb to the top of the world has symbolically laid the path for our student nurses who will go on to conquer their own “Mt. Everest’s” in the health care setting and save our world. ☺



John Patrick Hickey, PhD, RN, CNOR, is an instructor at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC. He's worked in emergency and operating room nursing and has been an RN since 1976. He reached the summit of Mt. Everest on May 24, 2007. He will be talking about his climbing and nursing triumphs at NSNA's 26th Annual MidYear Conference in Reno, NV.