



The "Up Close" column highlights an outstanding nursing student. Send nominee ideas to nsna@nsna.org.

By Anne Remington

From Oregon to Croatia: A Journey to Nursing

The more that I have to do, the better I am at getting things done." Nina Katovic says it took her a while to have this revelation. But now that she's figured it out, this Oregon Health Sciences University (OHSU) nursing student is loading her schedule with endeavors that address her passion for service and caring.

Just as it took Katovic time to understand how best to enrich her life, it took her some time to identify nursing as her true calling.

First, she earned her bachelor's degree in psychology from the Ohio State University, where she worked in two research labs. One of those labs focused on examining the impact of stress on health, and the lead researcher extended the reach of their work by partnering with Lighthouse for Women, a live-in treatment center for women dealing with pregnancy, homelessness, and addiction.

"I did anything—got articles, worked in the center with the women, watched their kids, got groceries," Katovic says of her work in the lab and then in the treatment center. "I just did whatever was needed."

Her work with the lab and Lighthouse got Katovic thinking about the interrelation of biochemistry and development. She moved to Binghamton University (a campus of the State University of New York) for a master's degree in behavioral neuroscience. There, her research focused on drug exposure in the prenatal period and its effect on adolescents. But she already had her sights set on the next turn in her life's path.

"Working in the lab, it was hard every day to be motivated," Katovic says, recalling the greater rewards she felt from working with the women and children in the Ohio treatment center. "I preferred working with people."



Katovic with her yellow lab mix pup, Veda, while training her as a therapy dog.

So Katovic hit the road again, this time heading for Portland, Oregon, home to a college of naturopathic medicine, another interest of hers.

"I see a naturopathic doctor for my health care, I've studied herbalism, and I'm a member of a holistic nurses association," Katovic says. "What draws me to it is the idea of prevention and health promotion; the advantages of getting to know someone and their rhythms; and the use of a combination of treatments to create a healthier person."

Katovic decided against pursuing a degree in naturopathic medicine and instead became a research coordinator at the Oregon Health & Science University Cancer Institute, where she worked for six years with cancer patients who took part in experimental treatments for their illnesses.

She remembers the first time she had to tell someone their cancer had recurred.

"I burst into tears," Katovic says, recalling that experience laid bare the knowledge that helping sick people "is real and is hard."

This hard work, this weaving of her interests in science and nature and humanity, is how Katovic came to nursing.

"I feel like it picked me," Katovic says. "I'm a

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helper—I know that about myself, and that part of me was not being stimulated, and now that part is coming out.”

As a nursing student, the ways Katovic has drawn on her “helper” tendencies is varied. With fellow nursing students, she volunteered with a program called SistaCare. Designed to advocate for natural birth and maternal health, SistaCare brings education programs about nursing and midwifery to low-income high school students. Katovic and other OHSU students became teachers, helping the young girls learn how to take blood pressures, do breast exams, and understand various elements of pregnancy, labor, and women’s health.

“Some were quiet but they were really excited and wanted to try all the different things,” Katovic says.

In addition to her involvement with school-sponsored service activities, Katovic has her own volunteer endeavors. For the past five years, she has been a doula, providing pregnancy and labor

support to her friends and others who learn about her services. She first became a doula when she considered midwifery as a career, but found that the hands-on nature of the doula’s role was really what spoke to her.

“The role of the doula is what I prefer—being a support person. It felt really great,” Katovic says of her first experience as a doula.

Today, Katovic still provides doula services on a volunteer basis and has also become certified in prenatal yoga.

“I like to get an idea and have it expand,” she says, excited about the opportunity for her to now serve expectant mothers in new and supportive ways. She’s also in the process of training her yellow lab mix pup, Veda, to be a therapy dog.

But there’s another volunteer pursuit that has Katovic so excited she can barely contain herself. As incoming president of the Oregon Student Nurses Association, she’s working to



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establish a “wellness bus” that would hit the road to provide health screenings and other services in rural communities. Already a year into planning for the project, Katovic is looking forward to literally “rolling out” this program in the months ahead.

Katovic has a personal connection to the mobile healthcare service—her uncle, a physician in Croatia (where Katovic spent part of her childhood), runs a similar program there. This summer, Katovic traveled to Croatia to see how the service functions there with the hopes of bringing new ideas back to Oregon.

Her journeys won’t end with Croatia and the back roads of Oregon. Katovic is already planning to travel to Africa with other nursing students next summer to work in HIV/AIDS outreach.

“HIV/AIDS is a crisis situation,” she says. “I can help with patient teaching and education, which is also about empowering individuals and giving control.”

And with the spare minutes in her day, Katovic will continue her nursing classes and plans to graduate in 2009, with the hope of practicing in a rural area. In spite of her resume of service to others, she has her sights set on continued advocacy on behalf of her community and patients because she knows there is still empowerment and education to be done.

“You feel like you don’t do enough,” she says. “I know so many people who do so much more.” ☺