

BREAKTHROUGH TO NURSING

40 Years of Progress and Persistence

by Mary Ann Tuft



The Breakthrough to Nursing Project focused on educating young people about career opportunities and addressed racial issues in the schools as well as in nursing.

The 40-year success story of Breakthrough to Nursing (BTN), NSNA's program to recruit minority students into nursing schools, is certainly no accident. The program's success required a clear vision from NSNA's leadership that nursing schools should be more open and accessible to all. It took an unwavering commitment to make that vision a reality. And, like most groundbreaking ideas, it required hard work and dedication from those who believed in the goal and were willing to donate their time and effort to accomplish it. The success of BTN is also the result of changing social views and a series of pivotal events that shook the country to its core and forced Americans to question their long-held ideas.

The 1960's and early 1970's, when BTN began evolving, was a period of dramatic change in this country. The American public, transformed by the tragic death of President John F. Kennedy, was eager to improve their country. They took to heart Kennedy's admonition to "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." This social awareness was especially strong among the postwar baby boomers coming of age in the 1960's, who wanted to make an enduring contribution to the improvement of society.

At the same time, the Civil Rights movement was gaining momentum. The public became acutely aware of the country's institutional discrimination after the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling in 1954, and subsequent efforts to integrate public schools in Little Rock and other southern cities. By the 1960's, Martin Luther King's leadership in the Civil Rights movement was making national headlines, further exposing the discrimination of blacks through freedom marches, lunch counter sit-ins, and bus boycotts. The violent reaction of many white southerners to the Civil Rights movement was broadcast in living-rooms across the country, angering many white northerners and inspiring them to take up the cause. Dr. King's assassination in 1968, and the subsequent riots in many large cities, increased the pressure for progress on Civil Rights.

While the Civil Rights campaign gathered steam, college campuses were becoming hotbeds of social unrest. Disillusionment over the war in Vietnam led to widespread campus protests and caused many young people to question the basic institutions of American society. This wave of unrest on American college campuses climaxed in 1970, with the death of four anti-war protestors at

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While society was evolving rapidly, so was nursing education. A big change in the 1960's was the rising popularity of baccalaureate and community college nursing programs, and a reduced emphasis on hospital-sponsored diploma programs. In these settings, nursing students were exposed, and in some cases involved, in the student rights and civil rights movements.

Nurses in general, and NSNA in particular, had long been strong supporters of minority rights. Since its founding in 1896, the mission of the American Nurses Association was to foster high health care standards for all people, regardless of nationality, race, creed, or color. NSNA, founded in 1952, had also been a strong supporter of the American

Nurses Association's antidiscrimination policy.

As NSNA leaders searched for ways to make the nursing profession more diverse, they realized that their organization could be instrumental in making a difference. By increasing the number of minority nursing students and graduates, NSNA would ultimately make nursing more diverse. The importance of diversity in the profession was heightened as nursing education shifted from the isolated setting of hospitals to college campuses, where political activism was becoming contagious. Nursing students became even stronger advocates for increasing diversity in their own profession, as well as in society as a whole.

In this hospitable climate, BTN was born, and its value was quickly becoming apparent.

First, there was a clear shortage of nurses in America. Some of the most acute nursing shortages were in inner cities, which had the highest minority populations.

Blacks and other minority students had long been underrepresented in

nursing schools. The number of blacks and other minorities in nursing schools was decreasing in the 1960s, even as the black population increased. This was caused by the closing of many nursing schools that had primarily served blacks.

The underrepresentation of minorities was most glaring in RN training programs. Traditionally, blacks and other minorities entering nursing followed the licensed practical nurses (LPNs) and nurses' aides tracks, rather than more rigorous RN training. This appeared to be an outgrowth of the segregated society in America before the Civil Rights movement. High school guidance counselors often steered blacks and other minorities into LPN and nurses' aide programs, and minority high school students often followed those career tracks out of peer pressure.

In its early years, BTN was funded by NSNA and various philanthropic groups working in association with the National Urban League. But it was countless hours of volunteer work, mostly by nursing students, that shepherded BTN through its formative years.

The program began with pilot projects in three cities: Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, and Omaha. The three cities were selected because of the students active engagement in the BTN project. Each city had the modest goal of increasing the number of blacks and other minorities enrolled in nursing school, by about a dozen. To accomplish this, volunteers researched the entrance requirements of nursing schools in those communities and sought potential sources of scholarships and loans for students. They encouraged schools to increase their minority enrollments, provided information on Breakthrough to Nursing to high school guidance counselors and enlisted the support of school nurses.



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Most importantly, the volunteers worked to raise minority students' awareness of nursing careers. Using everything from skits to movies to one-on-one tutoring, nursing students worked to recruit minority high school students into nursing. NSNA members turned out to be ideal recruiters because they understood first-hand what it took to succeed.

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With the early success of BTN, NSNA attracted the attention of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, which provided NSNA with a \$100,000 grant in 1971, facilitating the hiring of a full-time director and assistants. The added staff helped volunteers to organize minority recruitment efforts through local and state chapters, and facilitated pilot projects in Los Angeles, Phoenix, Denver, Columbus, and Charlotte.

The success of these efforts prompted the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to award the BTN program an additional grant of \$900,000 in 1974 which was used, in part, to expand the program to more cities. The additional funding

also helped strengthen tutoring programs to help keep minority students in nursing school.

My years at NSNA, which began in 1970, coincided with this very exciting time for BTN. With its strong grassroots organization already established, and the resources obtained through the federal grant, Breakthrough to Nursing was well positioned to bring about lasting improvements to the diversity of the nursing profession. NSNA, through its Foundation, further enhanced the program by establishing Breakthrough to Nursing scholarships.

It has been a pleasure to watch BTN grow and mature. Thanks to the perseverance of nursing students in the early years, today an increasing number of underrepresented populations are enrolling in nursing schools today. It's been even more exciting to see the program's participants become outstanding nurses and leaders in their profession.

As we celebrate BTN's 40th anniversary, I am pleased that the program is still going strong. This is a testament to the strength and dedication of NSNA members and staff, and to the overriding conviction that nursing must be open and inclusive. ☺



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