

# BREAKTHROUGH TO NURSING'S

## Early Years

by Kit Barnes

### The Program's Infancy

**N**ineteen seventy-one through seventy-seven were some of the most memorable years of my professional life. My position as the Breakthrough to Nursing Program Director on the NSNA staff was a great experience, and both personally and professionally challenging, as our leaders changed every year, and we worked closely with a variety of multicultural nursing professionals.



*Nursing students representing the Breakthrough to Nursing Project visit high school student in 1968.*

In 1955, NSNA's "Nursing Recruitment Committee," was established to improve the acute shortage of nurses, particularly minorities. That shortage of all nurses continued throughout the 1950's and early 1960's. The 1960's was a time of social and racial change in the country, so it was natural that a group of nursing students began to realize there were few minority professional nurses. Nursing students felt they were in a unique position to try and change the situation, and that they were well equipped to handle nursing recruitment since they had the student perspective on what qualities were needed most to succeed in nursing school. In 1964, the Committee worked with the National Urban League in New York to set guidelines for minority recruitment into nursing. The result was the adoption of a national project at the 1965 NSNA convention in San Francisco. In November, 1967, NSNA issued a news release on a meeting with Whitney M. Young, executive director of the National Urban League, to conclude arrangements for "Breakthrough to Nursing," a new phase of a long-term project to start initially in Pittsburgh, Omaha, and Minneapolis. The groundwork had begun.

The goal was to enroll at least 15 minority students in nursing schools by September, 1968. The three cities all exceeded their goals, with Pittsburgh alone placing more than 15 students. By the 1968-69 academic year, the three target cities had been joined by eight more. All monies used were donated by the state nurses associations and local community groups. The project continued this way for two years, run by committed students on the local level.

Meanwhile, in January, 1969, NSNA's Board of Directors set criteria for selection of nursing students



**Cleo Doster, first NSNA black president, meets with Board of Directors in 1976-77. He was named Honorary Member in 1982.**

to participate in a summer "Appalachia Project," sponsored by the Student American Medical Association (SAMA) and the federal government, to promote and improve techniques for better health care delivery in the region. Through the project, students would be exposed to a variety of social, economic and health care problems. In June, 1971 NSNA received its first \$100,000, two-year federal grant from the Division of Nursing, Department of Health, Education and Welfare. This was the first time a nursing student organization had been given a grant, and NSNA was able to employ a project director and staff, as well as mobilize volunteers nationwide through state student chapters. The BTN advisory board, appointed by NSNA, was a multiethnic committee of four students, two nursing faculty members, and a minority community representative. The board was chaired by NSNA's national BTN chairperson, Gwen Logan, a black student from New York University School of Nursing. The NSNA Board established the position of Breakthrough to Nursing Program Director, a minority with expertise in working with a variety of ethnic

groups. I was named BTN Program Director by NSNA's Executive Director Mary Ann Tuft, and joined the staff December 1, 1971. The board selected five target cities to begin launching the project: Phoenix, Los Angeles, Denver, Columbus, and Washington, DC.

## Breakthrough Goes National

I worked closely with Anne Harvey, RN, NSNA assistant director, the staff, the NSNA Board, and the national Breakthrough student chairperson, to establish a media campaign to publicize the project nationally. We began preparations for the spring 1972 convention, as I visited the target areas and as many nonfunded areas as possible to determine our priorities.

We distributed publications we had on hand that carried our message, and writers were hired to develop new materials such as, "A Career in Nursing - Check It Out," and "Who's Right for Nursing?" posters. Requests flooded in as many professional nursing organizations publicized our materials and supported us. Dianna Garcia, a Spanish-speaking

senior from Houston Baptist College in Texas, was elected Breakthrough Chair at the 1972 NSNA convention.

The first NSNA convention I had helped plan from the beginning as BTN Program Director was held May 6-9, 1973, in Minneapolis, MN. The convention featured a series of joint program sessions with the National League for Nursing, which held its own convention concurrently with NSNA. The keynote speaker, Congressman William Roy (D-Kansas), who had helped draft major health legislation, spoke to the major concern of nursing at that time—President Nixon’s proposed major budget cuts for 1974 in *all areas of support for nursing*. Students came prepared to mobilize a strong campaign against the cuts, and it was exciting to see them plan their strategies. Shortly after convention, NSNA student representative Dan Miller testified before the House Subcommittee on Labor to voice NSNA’s concerns regarding the cuts, and specifically how they would affect the project.”

“Guess Who’s Coming to Nursing School?” was the title of the first of two joint workshop sessions with NLN, and it dealt with the dilemma deans often faced trying to increase minority enrollment with a limited faculty, budget, and facilities. During the second session, Dr. Marian Capps, Norfolk State College, Virginia, discussed evaluating the learning potential of students, and other nurse experts discussed funding and grassroots organizing. The sessions were a great success, and they began the first significant open, direct dialogue between students, deans, and faculty. The discussions spoke to the core of minority recruitment and the students were taken seriously. Recruiters knew that cooperation and commitment from their schools were crucial to Breakthrough’s success.

“Breakthrough at the Crossroads,” was a how-to session for new interested areas. Target area students, faculty advisors and staff supplied technical assistance citing their experiences. By the end of the contract period, over 600 potential

candidates for nursing were reached. There was enough statistical data collected to justify the need for expansion of the project, and we were encouraged to submit an application for another federal grant. In June, 1974, NSNA’s BTN project obtained a three-year grant from the Division of Nursing to initiate and maintain 40 local target areas where career opportunities for minority students were available. The new funds made it possible to provide regional staff members as consultants to target areas; have a faculty associate in each funded target area to work with student volunteers; prepare and distribute guidelines and other materials; and enable local Breakthrough committees to meet for conferences and learning sessions. During the first years of the grant, approximately 500 NSNA members of various ethnic backgrounds were involved in Breakthrough, working together to break down social barriers, and it was an enlightened time. Positive relationships developed between recruiters and candidates, and more and more students assumed leadership roles in their state organizations. They grew more confident in themselves and in NSNA, and we were all very proud of our accomplishments.

## A Benchmark for the Future

NSNA’s first independent convention was held in Salt Lake City, Utah, April 25-28, 1974, with about 2,300 attendees. At the opening business session of the House of Delegates, two individuals were presented with the first ever Breakthrough scholarships.

The Breakthrough session at the 1974 convention, “Powwow on Indian Health,” is still one of my most memorable experiences. The “Powwow” featured two Crow Indians from Wyola, Montana: Susie Yellowtail, America’s first American



Breakthrough to Nursing brochures from the 1970's and 80's.



Indian RN and her husband, Thomas Yellowtail, a Medicine Man who gave the invocation in his native tongue. The atmosphere was reverent and respectful in the dimly lit main ballroom of the Hotel Utah as the aged couple, both in their 80's, entered to native drums as the audience sat on the floor Indian style. Ms. Yellowtail described the death of her mother (when she was a very young girl) which led her to become interested in nursing, through her education at a girl's boarding school and training at a Massachusetts nursing school, as the only minority student. Martha Primeau, associate professor, University of Oklahoma Health Science Center, Oklahoma City, and a Cherokee Indian, cited statistics on the high Indian mortality in the U.S. compared to those in the general population. Mildred Quinn, project director of Maternal and Child Health Service on the Navajo Reservation at Shiprock, Utah, gave a description of her work. At the close of the meeting, NSNA presented the Yellowtails with a blanket in honor of their 45th wedding anniversary, while Ms. Primeau gave them a traditional gift of bones. It was a very moving session and truly a transcultural experience.

The effect of "attitudes" on nursing care of various ethnic groups was the subject of another well attended seminar. Phyllis Paxton, a BTN California field representative, opened the program with a film on the effects of prejudice on children and led the discussion that followed. Ramon Agudo, a second-year student at East Los Angeles College, was elected the national Breakthrough Chairperson that year. NSNA's 1974 Board of Directors met in June, and voted the BTN project its top priority. A number of major "firsts," made possible by the funding, contributed substantially to Breakthrough's success. First, there was the paid field staff to work with target areas in geographical locations. Also, we were able to hold area workshops



**NSNA's first executive director Frances Tompkins, who served from 1952-1969. She is pictured with NSNA presidents Florence Huey (1968-69) and Frank Lang, first male president, 1969-70.**

throughout the country, specifically in Boston, Richmond, Los Angeles, Omaha, and Chicago. I distinctly remember the irony of being in Boston in the middle of a race riot as we, an interracial group of 150 student nurses, staff and professionals, met peacefully at one of the universities!

The 1975 convention was in Philadelphia, and the Breakthrough session, "More Than Skin Deep - Sensitivity to Cultural Differences in Nursing," featured three excellent speakers. We were encouraged to observe the large number of nursing faculty in the crowded audience. Brown Shoe Company expanded its scholarship program, awarding four \$2000 awards for minority students, plus four \$1000 awards to non-minority students. Frances Knight, a student at Loretto Heights College in Denver, CO, was elected the new national Breakthrough chairperson. As always after convention, momentum grew, as participants returned home with more knowledge, new ideas, and technical help from NSNA and the Breakthrough staff. More volunteer recruiters were added to the 40 target areas, and we maintained other areas of interest. More and more of the target areas were working on retention programs. The

faculty associates effectively brought together recruiters and faculty members to fill two ever increasing voids: 1. academically preparing candidates for entry into nursing schools through pre-entry tutoring and counseling sessions, and 2. tutoring sessions to retain those students already enrolled. Using school facilities and sometimes community locations, regular tutoring sessions were held for those who needed them. During 1975-76, approximately 1000 NSNA members were involved in Breakthrough recruitment. By June 1976, 86 more candidates had been admitted to nursing programs and 286 prospects waited in the wings for 1976-77. Another encouraging indication of growth was the sophistication with which the state associations and target areas used their local media to promote the project. At the NSNA 1976 convention in Kansas City, MO, the Breakthrough program focused on the patient's cultural beliefs and their affect on patient care. Another program focused on men in nursing, and featured a former NSNA president, Frank Lang, and a former Breakthrough advisory board member, Clarence Wooten. Sal Esparza, an Hispanic student at California State University-Fullerton, was elected national Breakthrough chairperson. The 1977 convention in Miami was the last one I attended as Breakthrough program director. NSNA celebrated its 25th anniversary, and we were in our third and final year of federal funding from the Division of Nursing. The Breakthrough workshop focused on transitioning to being nonfunded, and state presidents committed their associations to continuing the program even if we did not get refunded for retention. We prepared and distributed *Responsibility of a State Association Involved in the Breakthrough Project*, a manual on how to plan and execute a state program. The Breakthrough convention program was titled "What You Don't Know Can Hurt You (And

Your Patient)!” Valarie Lewis, a junior at Boston College, was elected national BTN chairperson for 1977-78. The idea of a national meeting on retention had been brewing for the last two years of the funding. With help from nursing schools, professional organizations, and the Division of Nursing, NSNA organized a three-day educational conference in Los Angeles, CA, in March, 1977, entitled: “The Three R’s - Reasons, Responsibilities and Rights of Retention.” The conference drew teams of students, deans and faculty, and concerned community leaders from across the country. Dr. Rheba de Tornyay, then dean of the College of Nursing, University of Washington, Seattle, keynoted this unique conference, and eight other distinguished speakers presented papers which were later published. NSNA students were now respected players in the field of professional nursing recruitment and retention, and they had earned it.

NSNA was not funded for the 1977-80 retention program submitted to the Division of Nursing, partly because of federal budget cuts. The Division proposed that NSNA’s Breakthrough Project align with those resources where future assistance could be found.

During my years at NSNA, I was thrilled to meet many students and professionals who were influenced by the Breakthrough to Nursing recruitment efforts. We were all working to change nursing for the better, and I know that there is a bright future ahead for the Breakthrough program, and future anniversaries to come. ☺

\*Editor’s Note: This article was published previously in *Imprint* in 1992, for the 50th Anniversary issue. It has been edited for space and clarity.



**Kit Barnes** served on the NSNA staff as BTN Program Director from 1971-1977.