

University of Wyoming Speech

by Dr. Gaurdia Banister

Convocation Ceremonies, May 10, 2008

To the Dean, distinguished faculty, graduates, proud family and friends, I am honored and delighted to be here with you today to celebrate your graduation from the Fay W. Whitney School of Nursing. I would also like to thank Dr. Marcia Dale for submitting my name for this distinction. I would also like to acknowledge the late Dr. Marion Schrum who was the Dean of the School of Nursing from 1973 – 1980 while I was a student here, and with whom I continued to be in contact with after graduation. She passed away earlier this year.

As I was reflecting over my career and preparing my remarks, I was thinking about how it is that I am standing here with you today. It has been a remarkable journey for me and in telling my brief story and sharing some thoughts with you, I hope one of things you will embrace is that your profession as a nurse can be anything, and I mean anything that you'd like it to be. The only limitations that you will have will be those that you create.

I grew up in Casper, Wyoming. I can't tell you how many times people have said, "I never knew there were African Americans who lived there!" My husband, who grew up in the segregated south who is in the audience today says that's the reason he spoke to me in the first place. I seemed like such an oddity to him.

While I was not born there, I moved to Casper with my parents when I was four months old. My parents who were raised in New Orleans moved to Wyoming to offer a better life for me and for my brother who was born a year later. I think of my parents as trailblazers and risk takers -- I don't think they would ever apply these words to themselves. Neither of them had ever been to Wyoming; they knew one good friend who told my father about a better job; and of all times to relocate, they moved to Casper in the middle of January. I can only imagine what it was like for them and the culture shock they experienced, and I ask you to put yourselves in their shoes!

As my brother and I were growing up, there was never a question about whether we would go to college. I suspect many of you grew up the same way I did. I came to the University of Wyoming because I didn't want to be far away from home. I'd like to acknowledge and honor my mother and father; my father was not feeling well and could not join us today and I would like to thank them and tell them how much I admire and love them. Would you please stand.

Now, how I became a nurse is interesting, at least interesting to me. It was one of the best decisions that I ever made in my life. I was not one of those people who grew up saying that they always wanted to be a nurse. In fact, I never really thought about it. I had two wonderful role models in my family, my great grandmother Perry and Auntie Nana who were care givers. While I don't remember as much about my great grandmother, my aunt was nurturing, thoughtful, supportive and truly enjoyed caring for others.

I became a nurse, I almost hate to admit it, because I took a test! I knew that I had a propensity for math and sciences. One semester I was a premed major, another I was considering genetics, another microbiology and on it went. My parents finally told me, you need to get out of school, you can't stay there forever. Perhaps some of the parents in this audience have had similar thoughts. So I went to a guidance counselor, took an exam, and nursing was one of the careers that I seemed best suited for. So I enrolled.

This decision changed the course of my life. While we rotated through all of the areas of nursing such as obstetrics, surgical, pediatrics, I found my niche and passion in psychiatric mental health nursing now called behavioral health nursing. We lived at the state mental institution in Evanston over the summer for my clinical rotation. I can still remember my first patient and the hours I spent talking to him and trying to connect with him. What I didn't realize at the time is how **“what I learned as a nurse”** such as critical thinking, communication, leadership, assessment and evaluation” would be interwoven into everything that I do and say,

Being in the school of nursing was a very nurturing environment. I knew Dot (Dorothy) Tupper, one of the nursing legends of the school. She was a wonderful instructor and she was so committed to her students and their learning. Dean Schrum, who I mentioned earlier, was also very involved with the students and wanted to know how we felt about the program. My nursing education and yours was built on such a strong foundation.

So, in my short time left today, I thought about what I would want someone to tell me if I was graduating today.

- **First, don't limit yourself and be a risk taker.** If you would have said to me twenty eight years ago that I would travel as far as Japan to offer a course to masters students about nursing administration; or that I would work with a group of nurse leaders in Washington, DC to enact legislation to ensure that nurses with behavioral health problems would receive intervention services to support their return to practice; or I would meet my husband by being a nurse, I would not have believed it. As part of my new responsibilities, I will be going to Dubai next week to consult with international nursing leaders who are building a hospital there. I'll be working with them to ensure that an infrastructure to support quality care, professional practice, collaborative decision-making, research and innovation is in place when they treat their first patient in 2011. My nursing career has been amazing to me.

I share this information with you to show that anything is possible. One of my favorite quotes by T. S. Elliot puts it best – **“You have to risk going too far to discover just how far you can really go.”**

- **Second, there is work to be done** and I firmly believe that nursing and nurses have the answer.
 - There are 47 million uninsured or underinsured people in our country.
 - We are in the midst of an obesity epidemic not only in adults but children. Due to obesity, children are being diagnosed and treated for heart disease, type 2

diabetes, high blood pressure, and some forms of cancer. This may be the first generation with a life expectancy that is shorter than their parents.

- Add to this the social discrimination that children face and the associated feelings of low self esteem and depression.
- And then there is the baby boomer generation with people like me who are going to further stress the resources of the health system as we grow older and reach retirement age.

We as nurses must take a leadership role. Out of all the professions, we spend the most time with patients and the strength of our profession is our ability to look at patients from a holistic perspective. Our work is integrated throughout one's lifespan. I encourage you to become an active participant to solve our nation's health care problems. We are in a key position to change health care delivery for America. I expect each of you to play a key role in that change.

- **Third, take advantage of every opportunity to learn and grow.** The world is changing so rapidly. I'll give you a couple of examples. When I was here 28 years ago I didn't have a computer. No one did. We did our work using a typewriter. Some of you may not even know what that is but I suspect most of the parents in the audience do. I used my first personal computer when I was in graduate school 4 years later.

In preparation for coming back, I took a virtual tour of the nursing school and I saw your state of the art simulation center. That was absolutely unheard of anywhere when I was a student. Change is occurring at lightning speed and you must see constant learning as a permanent part of your lives. It was also unheard of 28 years ago to have a virtual ICU, paperless hospitals and robotic surgery. And think about it: who knows what health care delivery will be like 28 years from now? Perhaps by then nurses will be legally responsible for all patient care in this country--- and maybe we should.

Now that you have a bachelors, consider a masters degree; if you have a masters consider a doctoral degree; if you have a doctoral degree, consider a post doctoral fellowship. If at all possible, go back to school as soon as you can. I seen so many of my friends and colleagues struggle going back to school after they have a family, a home, bills and responsibilities.

- **Fourth, find a mentor and mentor others.** Find someone who will encourage you, support you, push you but also give you honest and constructive feedback. Surround yourself with those who only want the best for you like those in the audience today who are here to celebrate your success. I also encourage you to be a part of a network that does the same thing for others.
- **And lastly help someone less fortunate.** As I look back on over my life, I realize how blessed and fortunate I've been. The fact that you are graduating today, indicates that each of you has been blessed. I challenge you to always be cognizant of the needs of those who are less fortunate. I believe that one of our key nursing roles is to act as an advocate especially for those who can't or don't know how to advocate for themselves.

As an example, it has been very rewarding for me to participate in a program that assists disadvantaged high school students who always dreamed of becoming registered nurses. These students have faced financial problems, social challenges, academic setbacks, health issues and more but remain focused on their goal. After five years of overcoming barrier after barrier, we had a first graduate last year and this year we are hoping to have seven more graduates. I can honestly say this has positively changed the lives of these students and in turn this will affect their children and their children's children. I encourage you to give back in any way that you can because there are so many people out there who need you.

I have always been an optimistic person. I know the world is full of challenges and negative events, but I firmly believe that a hopeful and optimistic person will find success easier to achieve. So, in closing, I leave you with this poem of optimism by *Christian Larson* entitled "*the Optimist's Creed.*"

The Optimist's Creed - Leadership Poem

I wish for you...

To be so strong that nothing can disturb your peace of mind.
To talk health, happiness and prosperity to every person you meet.
To make all your friends feel that there is something in them.
To look at the sunny side of everything and make your optimism come true.
To think only of the best, to work only for the best and expect only the best.
To be just as enthusiastic about the success of others as you are about your own.
To forget the mistakes of the past and press on to the greater achievements of the future.
To wear a cheerful countenance at all times and give every living creature you meet a smile.
To give so much time to the improvement of yourself that you have no time to criticize others.
To be too large for worry, too noble for anger, too strong for fear, and too happy to permit the presence of trouble.
Promise yourself these things.

In my journey in nursing, I've had a wonderful life and I wish the same for you.