

DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARD RECIPIENT

Mary Behrens

By Micaela Myers

Mary Behrens' nursing career took her to many unexpected places, including to Geneva to speak before the World Health Organization's World Health Assembly, to Vietnam to teach nursing and to public office in Wyoming. Her many accomplishments earned her one of this year's UWAA Distinguished Alumni Awards.

Behrens' call to nursing started when she was a child. She looked up to her nurse mother and went on house calls with her father, a family physician. She earned a bachelor's degree in nursing at the University of Wisconsin – Madison in 1964, a master's degree in maternal child health from the University of Colorado in 1969 and a nurse practitioner second master's degree from UW in 1998. Here at UW, she appreciated the stellar professors and the opportunity to learn about rural health care.

Behrens's 60-year career included not only direct care to patients but also serving nursing organizations, mentoring young nurses and giving back to the state as a public servant.

"I've had a rich career in nursing, and it led me into public policy," Behrens says. "I feel very strongly that many times

nurses' voices are not heard. For me to be able to serve on the Casper City Council and become mayor and then go on to the state Legislature and become a county commissioner certainly was a highlight of that part of my career. This also led me to a national office within the American Nurses Association and to serve on the national board."

Behrens says nurses are natural problem solvers, which makes them an excellent fit for public service. To promote this, she was active with the American Nurses Advocacy Institute, which prepared U.S. nurses to engage in political advocacy. Though retired, Behrens serves as president of the Wyoming Center for Nursing and on the UW Friends of the Fay W. Whitney School of Nursing board.

Her long list of honors includes the 2005 Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Nursing, the 2005 Nightingale Award from the University of Wyoming Fay M. Whitney School of Nursing and the 2015 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Wyoming Nurses Association. She is one of six Wyoming nurses in history to be nationally recognized as a fellow of the American Association of Nurse



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Practitioners. In 2018, Behrens gave a poster presentation in the Netherlands for International Advanced Practice Nurses, which covered her work with the Movement Is Life caucus that aims to break the cycle of physical inactivity that leads to many negative health outcomes.

"A big highlight of my career was being part of the official U.S. delegation to Geneva for the World Health Assembly," Behrens says. It was 2005, and



UW nursing student Sarina Myers practices IV and injection skills.

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she wrote to then-Vice President Dick Cheney urging him to send a nurse as part of the delegation. A week later, a call came through — she was to be that nurse. “I presented on the international nursing shortage and what steps needed to be taken to resolve it,” Behrens says. “After I testified, I had many nurses from all over the world tell me how happy they were that I had brought this issue into the spotlight. It resulted in a resolution to explore and find ways to reduce this problem.”

Another highlight was

teaching nursing in Vietnam. She got the call in 1995 — a team of nurses would be working to help bring formal nursing education back to the country.

“My husband Jerry had served with the Marines as a doctor in Vietnam in 1967–68, so when I heard about this opportunity, I didn’t have to think twice about it,” she says. Working through power outages and government spies, the nurses persisted. Behrens made over a dozen trips to the country and then began mentoring young nurses to make the trip.

“I feel strongly that I had a wonderful basic education in nursing, and I enjoy teaching and mentoring,” she says of her motivation to give back.

Mary and Jerry live in Casper and have three children and two grandsons.

Through her current work with the Wyoming Center for Nursing, Behrens helps nurses in Wyoming obtain their psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner certification. She also helps nurses receive important training on sexual assault cases, among other things. The organization works closely with UW.

“I am very confident that we are educating wonderful new nurses,” Behrens says.

She always tells folks that nurses do more than improve health care — they can improve communities and overall quality of life, two things that Behrens has certainly done.