



We Are Your People 2023

Over the course of this past year, we've shared the nursing journey of 12 incredible GAPNA members. Now you can enjoy reading about everyone who submitted their story this year.

care • continuity • connection

 **GAPNA**
Gerontological Advanced
Practice Nurses Association

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Danielle Barisone, APRN



I have always loved older adults. During college I was able to be near my grandmother who was in her late eighties. I was able to learn about her life and spend quality time with her. When considering a career, I knew I wanted to help people and liked the variety of options nursing offered. During nursing school I worked in a rehabilitation hospital, always looking forward to those few minutes I could spend hearing someone's story. I still look forward to those moments today.

My employer alerted me to the 2021 GAPNA Annual Conference, which I attended virtually. I loved the community of sharing information with the common goal of improving care for older adults. I knew I wanted to be involved, so I joined the Communications Committee. I now also participate in the VA SIG and the Northern California Chapter. It is great to connect with so many brilliant minds, and I am consistently amazed by what this group achieves.



The greatest lesson I've learned in life is that I still have a lot to learn. I love that there is always so much more to learn. We can learn so much from what others have been through. I continue to further my learning personally and professionally.

I love to learn new crafts and spend time outdoors when I'm not working.

In nursing, I am always looking to improve care for veterans, expand my knowledge on chronic pain in older adults, and dementia. I have found that being open to what the world has for me keeps things exciting and enables me to keep growing.





I have always loved nursing. As an only child, I used to play hospital with my dolls. I enjoy taking care of people and being a caregiver. I love people! I knew I wanted to be a Family Nurse Practitioner since I was young. When I was interviewing for my first Nurse Practitioner job, only one offer was extended to me, which was working in a Long Term Care Facility. Eleven years later, I truthfully believe it was divine

intervention! Working in geriatrics and Long Term Care, I continue to enhance my knowledge base on the entire life cycle. Geriatric patients are complex and thought provoking. These individuals have had a lifetime of experiences. I love getting to know their whole story - personally, professionally, and medically. Being a layer of support for the patient and their families is an honor.

Unfortunately, many older adults do not have someone to consistently speak for them, and they are alone in navigating today's healthcare network. Developing relationships with this population, being and advocate for the patients, and providing a voice of support and understanding is my goal.



Tawana Braham, ANP-BC



"I don't lose; I either win, or I learn."

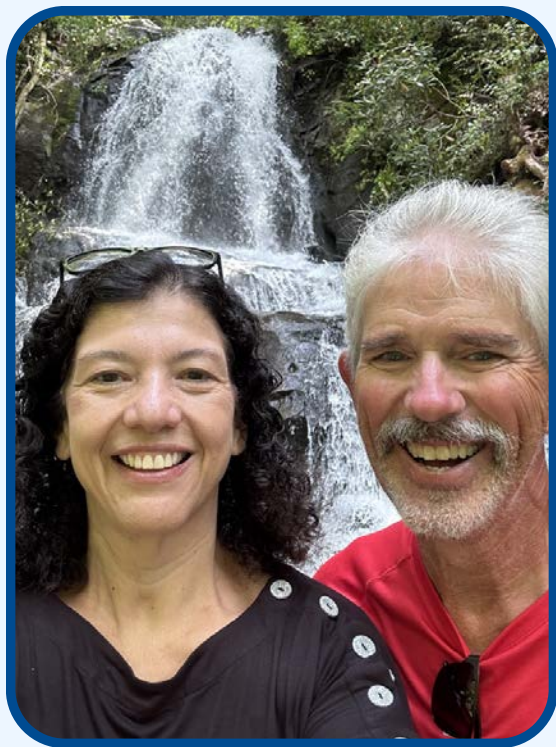
- Nelson Mandela

This quote resonated with me because I don't give up, I persevere. If I don't win, I keep pushing through, but I also learn from the experience. I try to always set myself up to achieve my goals. I am grateful for the opportunity to be a part of GAPNA to help feed my professional hunger with bountiful resources and educational opportunities. I've also been able to develop my leadership skills through the Georgia Chapter and the GAPNA Leadership Institute. I can't wait to see what comes next!



Helen Burns, DNP, ANP-BC, AGN-BC, AOCNP

When I was 16, I had the opportunity to work as a caregiver for Sue, a young woman at my church diagnosed with a rare spinal cancer at age 28. At the time of her diagnosis, Sue was pregnant with her first and only child, a son. Shortly after giving birth, Sue became wheelchair bound. I spent several summers caring for Sue and her son while her husband worked. I got married, went to nursing school, and remained friends with Sue until she passed away at age 40. Sue inspired me in so many ways, but it was her encouragement and support that made it clear I was destined for nursing.



I've been lucky to know many incredible nurses throughout my nursing journey. Deborah Dunn was my instructor and preceptor in NP school. Her passion for older adults and her wealth of knowledge is just incomparable! All these years later, I still remember so many things she taught me, as well as her incredible compassion for older adults. I try to model myself in her image! Michelle Moccia is another mentor who introduced me to GAPNA and encouraged me to become involved. She challenged me to share my expertise with the group.

Michelle emulates the Energizer Bunny and I remain in awe of the things she has accomplished in her career. Lastly, my friend and colleague Holly Favero has been a true inspiration in the workplace. I have learned so much from Holly in the past 15+ years that we've known each other. Holly gave me the incredible opportunity to step out of my "comfort zone" to serve on our hospital's Ethics team and to encourage our colleagues in a spiritual care group that we co-lead.

I live by the Bible verse, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," Matthew 22:29. There is nothing more important to God than people.

Nurses are in a unique position to care for people at their most vulnerable, and I can't think of a better way to honor God. However, it is impossible to serve God and love people if we don't take care of ourselves. Never feel guilty about taking time for self care!



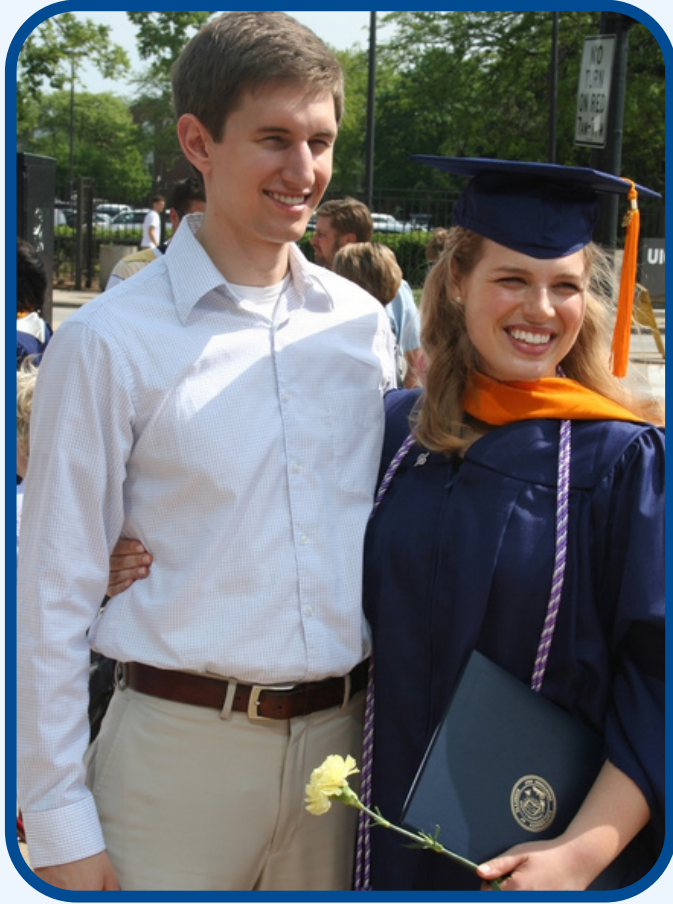


Gloria Craig, AGNP

I always wanted to be a nurse, like my mom. She was my original role model of how to treat older adults - how to care for them, value them, and treat them with dignity. When I was 15, I worked as a CNA with my mother, who was the Charge Nurse in a Skilled Nursing Facility. She taught me how to be a compassionate nurse, serving others with respect. I try to always remember to put myself in the patients' place. No one ever plans to be old and frail. Character is who you are when no one is looking.

After spending 25 years working in the ICU, I decided to return to school and focus on a higher level of care for older adults. I wanted to have a direct impact on my patients as a Nurse Practitioner. I have found my career as a House Calls Nurse Practitioner providing primary care in the home to be very rewarding.

Bethany Duyser, DNP, RN, AGPCNP



I wanted to be a nurse since high school, back then I would have said to "help people." Looking back, I think I knew better than to underestimate how empowering it is to know about human health and the systems that influence it. I was most interested in not being limited to any one part of the human experience; dentists only work with teeth, hairdressers only deal with hair, and social workers handle social problems. I wanted to do a little bit of everything: physical and emotional support, as well as learning about how people live and experience the world.

My first job was in a surgical/trauma ICU. I thought I was going to be a tough-talking, tight t-shirt-wearing nurse, just like on TV. Maybe I watched too many re-runs of ER, and thought I could meet George Clooney. In that environment, it felt like everyone enjoyed caring for the young, otherwise healthy trauma victim and felt frustrated by the older adult with delirium and chronic illness. I felt just the opposite. I even remember the patient I was caring for when I figured out there was nothing wrong with me, I just needed to switch to gerontological nursing! I was trying to prevent delirium and increase calorie intake in an older ICU patient. I helped comb her hair and watched the morning news with her, after sneaking her an ice cream sandwich for breakfast. My charge nurse told me she needed to be moved to the floor so I could "get some work done." I was completing rounds in a nursing home as an NP student less than a year after that!

I was lucky to have an incredibly influential mentor early in my nurse practitioner career. My first medical director was one of the few physicians I've met who actually "gets it" in terms of working with NPs.

He very much had the perspective that our patients benefited from having BOTH an NP and a physician on their care team. We didn't have the same role, credentials, or training, and because of that we were even better able to collaborate and share knowledge for our patients. I work in a very different role now, often with people from other professions, and I keep his lessons with me all the time.

I joined GAPNA as a new NP, looking to satisfy my continuing education requirements. Over the past decade, GAPNA has been a

chance for me to stay engaged with what advanced practice nurses are doing across very different roles. I don't have a patient-facing job these days, and while I am enjoying what I do (and still use my clinical experience daily), I sometimes feel alienated from a profession that so highly values patient care. I love hearing about all the dynamic work of my peers and



colleagues in this group! There are something like 4 million nurses in this country, so there is no single "right" way to do it!

There are so many different ways to have a meaningful career in nursing that will recognize your unique gifts, sometimes it just takes time to find the right role. A phrase that sticks with me was the name of an initiative supporting direct care workers called, "Better Jobs Better Care."* I think this concept applies to nurses and APNs, too. We talk a lot about this work as a calling or a mission, but it is also the job we do every week. Job quality and care delivery are inextricable for both parties in the healthcare environment; the NP and the patient. It doesn't undermine the altruistic nature of our profession to want both better jobs and better care. One begets the other.

Theresa Ejindu, MSN, APRN, AGNP-C

Being an immigrant, some of us had to start afresh. The largest barrier I faced was that a lot of my teachers in nursing school didn't believe in me. I have an accent, and coming from Africa, they automatically had this notion, like 'she can't pass exams and doesn't have the knowledge'. I proved them wrong.



My husband actually encouraged me to try nursing and I fell in love. I've always wanted to help people, so nursing gave me that opportunity to do good and inspire others who may have been told that 'you are not going to make it'.

Never give up. The obstacles will come, but never give up. Look at the prize ahead.



Katherine Evans, DNP, FNP-C, GNP-BC, ACHPN, FAANP



I love spending time with older adults. I adored my grandparents and treasured the time we spent together. When searching for the right path in healthcare, I spent a day shadowing a nurse practitioner. We spent the morning in the office seeing patients and the afternoon at a Long-Term Care facility. I loved every minute of the day and was sold on becoming a nurse practitioner immediately. I am fortunate to have a career that allows me to serve a population I love and is also fulfilling! I went to a GAPNA conference when I first began practicing in Long-Term Care. I bonded with many like-minded clinicians and made GAPNA my professional home. GAPNA has provided continuing education, professional development opportunities, networking, leadership experience, lifelong friends, and a family of colleagues to lean on. I recommend everyone find a group outside of your workplace to nurture and guide you on your path.



I've always wanted to be a nurse. As a child, I used to pretend my dolls were in major car accidents and I was the nurse caring for them! It was my calling. I chose to work with older adults because they have a lot of wisdom - and they move slower! Kids run around the unit too much for me.



Holly Favero, NP

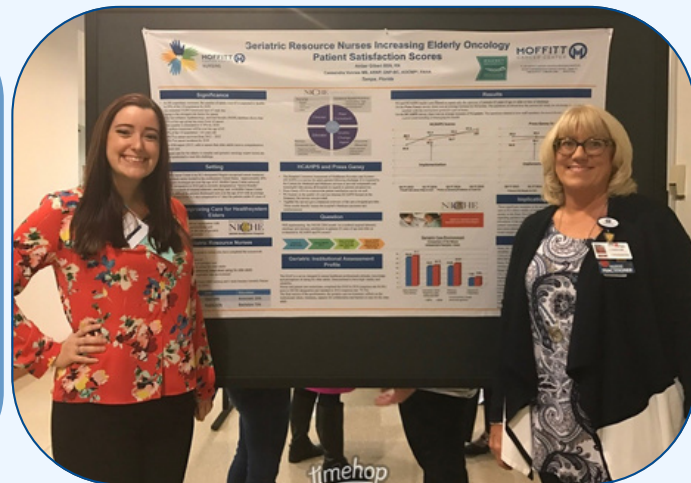
I'd encourage everyone to become a Nurse Practitioner, not a Physician's Assistant. Doctors and PAs treat the disease, while Nurse Practitioners and Nurses treat the person, so we all must work together. Communication between healthcare team members facilitates better care. Communication is free, but also priceless.

When I was younger, my mom was hospitalized for about a month due to a subarachnoid hemorrhage. She was very lucky and fully recovered thanks to her wonderful medical care team. I remember visiting her, and not many people acknowledged me, except for the nurses. They would answer all my questions and always made me feel in the loop as much as a kid could be. That's when I knew nursing was my future.



I was fortunate enough to have Dr. Cassandra Vannes as my instructor in nursing school at the University of South Florida, cementing her as a key mentor in my nursing journey. I now work with her at the Moffitt Cancer Center. Dr. Vannes introduced me to GAPNA and has guided me through research projects during school and in the workplace. She also supported me through achieving my Gerontological Nurse Board Certification through ANCC and my Gerontological Specialist Certification through GNCC.

Amber Gilbert, DNP, APRN, GERO-BC, OCN, AOCNP, AGPCNP-BC, GS-C



"It is never too late to be what you might have been." - George Eliot
No matter where you are in life, what obstacles you have had to overcome, it is never too late to try something new or do something different.

Kristy Hardy, APRN, AGPCNP-BC, GS-C



My journey to gerontology began as a young girl. My father instilled in me that it didn't matter what I did in life, but whatever it was, to make sure I was able to find a job anywhere. At first, I thought I wanted to be a paralegal, but quickly realized it didn't suit me. I knew nurses had many job opportunities, so I chose to pursue nursing in college. I wasn't sure at first if I wanted to embody this career, even questioning it to the end of my BSN program. It was during clinic rounds that I found dialysis and knew nursing was my calling. My grandmother was a big influence on my life growing up and helped me connect to the older population. Her love was genuine and warm, and we created many happy memories together. In my senior year of high school, I had the opportunity to work in an Independent Living facility serving meals to the residents. I grew to love them as my own family. I was saddened to leave that job but knew college would take me on my next path. I worked at the Veterans Administration Hospital through school to help pay bills, serving on the general medical floor. In letters I wrote to my parents at the time, I expressed how the veterans had such a big place in my heart that seemed to grow each day. It astounds me to think about how these influences shaped who I am today.



I worked many years as an RN prior to becoming a Nurse Practitioner in many different settings, including dialysis, home health, hospital ICU, case management for an insurance company, and nursing home care, each role teaching invaluable lessons. While pursuing my master's degree in Adult-Geriatric Primary Care, I worked for a nursing home as the evening supervisor. I had a very special professor during this time that helped me find my passion and geared me towards success in the field. She even allowed me to follow her rounds at the nursing home. My love for gerontology was cemented in that work. I realized my true calling when working in the dementia unit. Initially I was afraid that this work would be too sad for me to endure, but as I worked with the patients, I found joy in working with older adults.

As I continue to find my home in GAPNA, I'm encouraged by the community built by fellow members. I feel the support from others who have the same desire as me, to serve the geriatric population. I encourage others to take time to see people, not just as an object, a number, or any other preconceived notion. Take time to understand people, and you may be the ultimate voice that helps them. I live by a quote from Proverbs 3:5-6, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths." This verse has meant so much that I created a framed picture stating, "Wisdom does not come from me." I never want to forget that though I have gained wisdom and knowledge over the years, my Chief Physician, Jesus, gives me wisdom on even the most difficult cases.

Nursing was a career choice that came to me later in life. I spent the majority of my undergraduate years anticipating law school as my next step, based only on the vague idea that I loved to read and write, with little previous exposure to the field of medicine. When it became clear to me that this was a path that would bring me neither happiness nor personal fulfillment, I devoted myself to finding a career that would. My employer at the time gently steered me toward nursing as a good possible option given my love of people and passion for advocacy, and it took no time for me to realize that there was no better place for me.



Rebekah Lee Hayes, DNP, AGPCNP

As a Korean American, caring for my elders has always been expected as matter of course, as Korean culture has a strong tradition of deep elder respect rooted in the Confucian teachings of filial piety. From childhood I was taught that the elderly, as the foundational pillars of our culture, should be treated with the utmost care and deference. This belief guided me throughout my nursing career and continues to shape the goals of my clinical practice. Having the opportunity to care and advocate for the geriatric community is a privilege that I'm honored to undertake.



I first joined GAPNA as a student at Vanderbilt University School of Nursing and it quickly became one of the cornerstones of my career as both an APRN and educator. GAPNA provided me with a place where I truly felt that I belonged, where I was surrounded by incredible, accomplished mentors who took me under their wings and helped me flourish (and still do). I've always said that our own GAPNA President, Dr. Jennifer Kim, is who I want to be when I grow up. She's an invaluable source of guidance, support, and knowledge to many young nurses, and has made an indelible mark on the way that I approach gerontological care and nursing education. Having the chance to study under, and now work alongside, providers like Dr. Kim, as well as MANY other GAPNA members that I've met along the way, continues to give me goals to work toward and inspiration for new ways that I can help care for the aging adult community.

I like to think that nursing chose me. I am inspired by every nurse I meet – especially the ones who have dedicated their lives, sometimes longer than my lifetime, to caring for others. After moving to the United States in 2012, my husband encouraged me to try nursing, which seemed to be a common profession among Nigerian immigrant women. I tried it and I loved it. Since beginning my nursing journey, I have continued to pursue education to stay up to date on current medical practices. I strive to serve my patients with the best care; the care they deserve.



Isuan Iriabho, CRNP, MSN, AGNP-C, GS-C



I started my nursing career as a nursing assistant and always felt drawn to older adults, especially the patients with dementia. I enjoyed the conversations I had with them – getting to learn about their past, their families, the tragedies they have faced, and most importantly, their wisdom. I saw my parents in them and made a vow to treat all patients the way I would treat my parents, or the way I hope to be treated as I age. I believe we all should treat others how we wish to be treated.

When I became a nurse practitioner, I searched for tools that would provide me with resources to care for the population I serve. I love GAPNA because this group of nurses works to change healthcare for older adults one day at a time.



I came to nursing later in life, after previous careers of a secretary and in electrical engineering at a nuclear power plant. I realized I wanted to be hands on, working with people. I went to school as an LPN, then continued on for my RN, BSN, MSN, and finally my doctorate. I have spoken to so many nurses who have had a similar trajectory! The amount of clinical experiences I obtained following that route of education was amazing and I appreciate every moment of it. Each clinical experience has informed my current position as an educator. I was reticent about teaching in the beginning, as it was certainly a paradigm shift. Moving forward doesn't mean never failing or never being rejected, but finding your way through sometimes winding paths. Don't be afraid of failure. My educational background is as a Family Nurse Practitioner. I worked in a primary care setting for four years, eventually moving into specialty care in hemophilia, and then neurology. While in neurology I was a coordinator of a drug study for adults 65 and older, and just fell in love with that population. It's hard to explain the effect older adults had on me! Caring for older adults has become a passion of mine, guiding me to teaching NP students on caring for older adults. One of my favorite jobs over the years has been performing home visits. I would often spend an hour or more talking with an older adult in their home, listening to their life story. The things they share are amazing and unforgettable.



Ann Kriebel-Gasparro, DrNP, CRNP, FNP-BC, GNP-BC, FAANP

I joined GAPNA in 2011 after obtaining my GNP in 2010, when a colleague mentioned GAPNA might help me with continuing education and networking with like-minded APRNs. GAPNA has introduced me to many incredible APRNs, some that I would consider mentors. I would encourage APRNs to volunteer for a committee, SIG, or task force in GAPNA. You may find what you're truly passionate about! There are so many ways to give back. I think there is one quote that says it all - treat others how you would like to be treated. As such a vulnerable population, the older adult needs our care and respect. If you're as passionate about caring for older adults as I am, GAPNA is the place to be.

Anne Maynard, APRN, APN-BC, GNP-BC

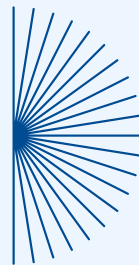
As a child, I wanted to be a teacher. Even through undergraduate school, I was very interested in science and teaching. I knew I wouldn't do well in a middle or a high school, so I decided to pursue pediatric nursing. When I was in nursing school, I found my love for older adults.



I considered leaving nursing school due to clinical challenges.

My dad reminded me "Its supposed to be hard. If it was easy, everyone would do it." My professors and now Nurse Practitioner colleagues were a huge help in guiding my journey.

I even had a nurse manager I worked with during grad school who helped me find a good fit for my first job as a Nurse Practitioner.



I found GAPNA as a student in 2006 and have been here ever since. I have had the opportunity to serve on the Chicagoland Chapter board in many positions, including Secretary, Vice President, President, and Past President. Being on the chapter board helped me stay involved and helped me foster my leadership capabilities.



If I could give advice to anyone just starting out, I would say listen, and respect others. We have a lot to gain by simply listening to others' stories.

After high school, I enrolled in a junior college in Boston which prepared me as an Advanced Medical Secretary. My first FT position was in a general surgeon's office, which employed a FT RN from Ireland (and her sister, who occasionally filled in as well). I was so impressed with the knowledge, skill, interpersonal communication, and confidence that these nurses displayed. These were my only nursing role models at the time. This resulted in my exploring a return to college for nursing preparation. I completed an associate in science degree at a community college, followed by an RN-BS degree completion at a state college while working FT on a 42-bed medical-surgical nursing unit of a community hospital. Just over four years later, I enrolled in the UMass Lowell MS in Gerontological Nursing Program, preparing Gerontological NPs. When I was enrolled in UMass Lowell's graduate program, I was introduced to Dr. May Futrell, a true pioneer who had established the country's very first MS in Gerontological Nursing program preparing the Gerontological Nurse Practitioner.



**Karen Devereaux Melillo, PhD,
A-GNP-C, FAANP, FGSA**

The most significant mentor in my journey was Dr. May Futrell, who at the time I interviewed for the MS program was the Director of the federally funded HRSA project that would prepare GNPs at the MS level. She served as the Program Director and a faculty member throughout the program. Four years after I graduated, she recruited me to teach in the same program that I was prepared in. I never left. We have conducted research together, published numerous peer-reviewed publications and book chapters, presented at regional, national and international conferences, and continue to engage in passionate discussions about the care of older adults – and the need to prepare additional GNP (now A-GNP) clinicians and scientists to meet the health promotion and health care needs for this population. Dr. Futrell was a true pioneer in gerontological nursing, and my proudest publication resulted from my ability to honor her in a Journal of Gerontological Nursing Spotlight on Nursing Leaders, “May Futrell, PhD, FAAN, FGSA: Gerontological nursing and gerontology leader and mentor”, in the May 2008 issue.



Never underestimate the power of collaboration and cooperation in moving the agenda forward in gerontological nursing. Stay involved, network with other professionals, contribute where and when you can – it will improve care and foster a sense of accomplishment that what you do matters. I have been blessed and privileged to choose work in an academic setting and practice environments where quality gerontological nursing is recognized as the highest of priorities. The ability to influence the care of older adults through the education, research, practice and policy involvement of students at all academic program levels has enabled future gerontological nurse practitioner leaders to positively influence the quality of care that is so desperately needed. ‘Do what you love, and love what you do, and you’ll never work a day in your life.’

Joan Michelle Moccia, DNP, ANP-BC, GS-C

“The best interest of the patient is the only interest to be considered.”
– Dr. William Mayo. Being a candy striper and volunteering in a nursing home, I instantly knew ‘these were my people’ to nurture with love and care. I witnessed so much despair and isolation. The residents tugged at my heartstrings. I wanted to protect them immediately - a sort of Mama bear. I witnessed other caregivers administering TLC; however, I also witnessed others who were less caring and not nice to patients. Caring for older adults is caring for our future selves and those who will come after us. My three daughters and my husband would always tease me, “you are all about the older adults; everything you do is around them.” I gently told them, “Yes, and I am helping to prepare the world so you too will have someone to nurture you when you get old, because I won't be there to make sure.”





"Becoming a caregiver was natural for me, and I've encountered amazing mentors along the way. My mother was the neighborhood caregiver and my first role model. Her kindness and generosity impacted everyone she met; I wanted to be just like her – only with more kids! The nurses and nurse aides I worked with when I was a volunteer inspired me to become a nurse and provide the best care to my patients possible by showing me how to extend respect and love to older adults.

I've also had the privilege to work with a number of Madonna University and Eastern Michigan University nursing instructors, including Dr. Deborah Dunn. Dr. Dunn has offered wisdom, leadership, and spirituality to help me on my journey. I've not only found lifelong friends and invaluable peers through GAPNA, but I've also furthered my knowledge and broadened my perspective of gerontology as a whole. These are my people! When participating in meetings and conferences, the shared compassion for older adults and positive energy is palpable. The rewards of what we do every minute, every day, are endless, and 'that's all I got to say about that.' – Forrest Gump"



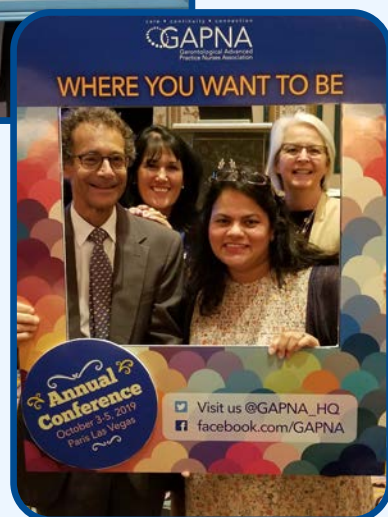
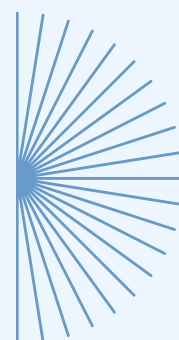
I always knew I wanted to help people. I started my working life in Human Resources. While I enjoyed my job, I hated firing people. Instead of helping people, it really hurt individuals to lose their employment. Layoffs were building up across the industry and the economy was crashing, so I decided to change paths. I had a friend working as a floor nurse at the time, and opted to try nursing. Life is too short to be anything but happy!



Nursing is a unique journey in the way that it allows you to give back to your community. You were cared for, you will care for others, and you will be cared for again. We must set a good example to others and care for everyone we



encounter. I chose to work with older adults because I love hearing the stories of others' lives, their journeys, and their experiences. I learn daily from my patients and take their lessons with me as I grow in my practice. I've had too many mentors to name, but one of my preceptors was GAPNA Past President Debbie Dunn. GAPNA has provided opportunities for me to strengthen my role as a Nurse Practitioner with so many ways to get involved at both the local and national level. The conferences are a hub of resources to improve knowledge, grow understanding of our field, and network with like-minded colleagues. I look forward to meeting with my fellow GAPNA members in Chicago, IL, and San Antonio, TX for the 2024 GAPNA conferences!



Nina Nandish, AGPCNP-BC

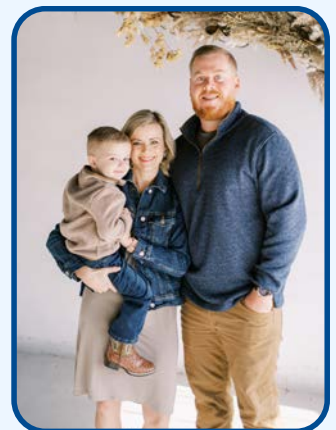
"You can pay now and play later, or you can play now and pay later." I made this quote up for myself to motivate me through school and help me to be the best I can. It still helps motivate me to stay active and working hard, because someday, I want to be an older adult who travels and relaxes! Now, I use this motto on my students who feel like they may be missing out due to school obligations.



I was exposed to nursing while working as a volunteer in the community hospital where I grew up as a teenager. I loved how nurses were the ones really impacting and caring for their patients. Once I found my career in nursing, I was just drawn to older adults. My grandparents were very active in my life and were some of my favorite people. I have a big heart for the older adult population.



Cori Cunningham O'Neal, DNP, CRNP, AGNP-C



I joined GAPNA about three years ago at the recommendation of Dr. Natalie Baker, who has been an incredible professional mentor to me. I have had the opportunity to get involved in multiple committees and look forward to continuing my leadership within GAPNA. I am so thankful she led me here!



As a child, I spent a lot of time with my mother's parents. My Grandma Monendo was from Poland. She and her friends taught me how to play Pinochle and other card games and would tell me life changing stories. Sometimes they spoke Polish together, and I knew they were gossiping. My Grandpa Monendo picked me and my sister up every Sunday after church to visit all of our Aunts and Uncles he felt keeping connected to the elders was important. He bought me my first 45 record - "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" by Tony Bennett. I remember pantomiming the song to him, using the vacuum as my microphone.

Ruth Ann Pendergrast, MSN, RN, AGPCNP-C, CWON

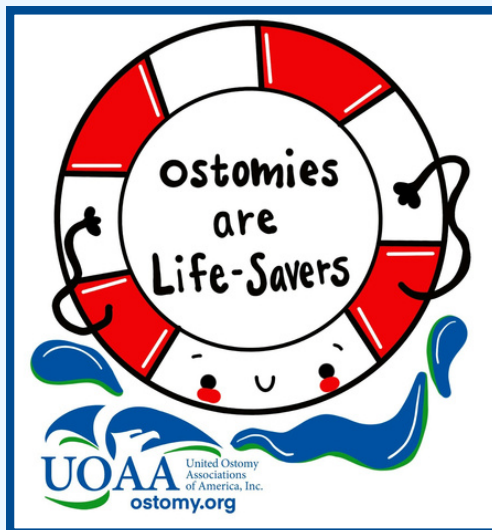


When I was 15, Grandpa Monendo was told he had colon cancer and was not doing well with chemotherapy. I remember having my first discussion about death with him, after he told me he didn't want to live anymore. I cried as I told him I wanted him to see me live my life. He agreed that he wanted to be there too, but "not like this," he said. He asked me to be a nurse, since he felt that nurses were the ones that got him through the roughest days and explained his treatment so well. He said people needed that. I promised him I would become a nurse, and cried for him at my high school graduation and then at my nursing graduation.



It's never too late to be a nurse. I am a nurse for over 40 years. I went back to school to be an nurse practitioner at 58, following years of encouragement from colleagues and friends to get the degree. Now, I am running an outpatient ostomy clinic comprised mostly of seniors. During my last clinical rotation at Wayne State for NP school, someone came to talk to us representing the GAPNA Great Lakes Chapter, and I've been a member ever since.

I was lucky to have many mentors along my nursing journey, including my parents, my sister, Mr. Betzler, a wonderful high school teacher, and Shirley Detke, one of my college instructors. I hope to reciprocate the encouragement and support I've received along the way.



“Feel the fear and do it anyway.” – Susan Jeffers.

I grew up in rural southern Mississippi on a crop farm. In our small town, there was one pediatrician. I thought my career was to become a physician in a hospital, like on Medical Center. Going away to college for the first time, I felt unprepared for the life freedom brought. I chose to leave after two semesters and went home to figure out what to do next. My best friend in high school always wanted to be a nurse and was planning to move to Houston, Texas, to go to nursing school. He convinced me to apply with him and we both got accepted, so we moved to nursing school together. In our first semester, my friend opted to leave school and move back home, but I stayed to continue my journey. I struggled with coursework and barely made it through, but I graduated and became an RN.

George Peraza-Smith, DNP, GNP-BC, A-GNP-C, GS-C, CNE, FAANP



I spent my first few years as a nurse in a Neonatal Stepdown ICU, and I loved working with not only the babies, but also helping the parents cope during difficult times. I transitioned into Med-Surg and Neuro for a while and then got a position working in geropsychiatric units, where I found my passion for working with older adults. I went on to achieve my GNP, and eventually my DNP. From the RN to the NP role, I found my dream job, which did not turn out to be a physician. Becoming an NP has been without a doubt a much better fit for me. I did not come to nursing – nursing came to me.

Nursing and working with older adults is who I am. A significant portion of my life has been spent in gerontology. In junior high school, I worked as an orderly in our small 50-bed rural Mississippi hospital. I thoroughly enjoyed working with the nurses and the patients, and truly found my love for older adults. Joan Bezon was the first gerontological nurse practitioner I had ever met. I knew from our first encounter that I wanted to be just like her. Joan made learning about aging and older adults magical, and absolutely epitomized everything that a GNP stands for – smart, passionate about person-centered care for older adults, an expert clinician, and an early adopter of social determinants of health in practice. As my primary instructor and mentor through my GNP program, Joan exposed me to what would be my lifelong career, and I am so grateful for her guidance.



I find joy in working with older adults partly because they are so grateful for the care they receive. They are often willing to share stories, lessons, and history, if only we are willing to listen. For me, hearing about my patients' lives and loved ones was better than reading stories in a book. I learned that older adults are so much more than their appearance or circumstances – more than wrinkles or fragility. As a younger person, I was forced to confront getting older myself and examine my own life. I have grown to value the importance of relationships in my life, as well as the importance of living in the moment, and strive for a life well-lived, with dignity.

I joined GAPNA and the Florida Gulf Coast Chapter in 2010. From the first GAPNA Conference I attended, I knew I had found my place – my people. People with a passion for providing compassionate, quality care to older adults and their loved ones. GAPNA members have an instant connection related to our shared passion for working with older adults. Many of my GAPNA colleagues have mentored, guided, and supported me in my growth and career. Another instrumental mentor in my career has been Evelyn Duffy, DNP, AGPCNP-BC, FAANP, who I met in an elevator at one of my first GAPNA conferences. I learned she presided over the Gerontological Nursing Center at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) and through our brief conversation I knew I wanted to attend CWRU for my DNP and have Evelyn chair my project. She continues to help me learn and challenges me to grow as a leader.



I often tell folks that nursing found me, and that I was meant to be a nurse. With the support of my family, friends, colleagues, mentors and more, I have learned to walk through fear and accomplish things I used to think were impossible. We all feel fear – its what we do because of the fear that is crucial. My advice is to find your passion and live your purpose. I encourage my students to stay focused, be persistent, and keep showing up. Within GAPNA, I recommend joining the Committees and Special Interest Groups (SIGs). I have volunteered with many committees and SIGs through my GAPNA career and have been lucky to meet so many like-minded colleagues that have expanded my professional life. I look forward to staying active in GAPNA and continuing to meet new people to learn with and learn from in the future.

Katerina Perez, NP

I wanted to be a singer on a cruise ship as a child, but watching my mother as a nurse inspired me to change my future. I was drawn to working with older adults because of their vulnerability, and have stayed in this field because I enjoy their wit and when they share their life experiences. I believe we all must set aside our differences to advance the greater good.



I was lucky to have mentors and friends to guide me throughout my nursing journey. When I was in NP school, I wanted to network with like-minded colleagues, and found GAPNA after a quick Google search. I've been here ever since! I'm grateful for the opportunities GAPNA provides for education and leadership.

My journey to becoming a nurse was not an easy one. I always knew I wanted to be in the medical field. At age 7, I remember using my sister's doll to do surgery. The first time I went to a hospital for the birth of my niece, I told my family I wanted to be a nurse. I was so impressed by their knowledge and patient care! At 11 years old, I was sure about my future. However, I didn't take high school seriously, and "got by" with a C-average. In the early 1980's, I was more worried about making money than school. My turning point was getting rejected from nursing school due to my grades. I became determined to take the long road to becoming an RN. I started with LPN school, which I viewed as a good steppingstone to nursing school and becoming an RN. Three months prior to my scheduled graduation, I had to take a leave of absence to recover from a severe illness. The following year I was able to complete the remainder of my required courses and graduate as an LPN. I went directly back to school to begin studying to become an RN. Since I was working full time and taking classes year-round, I only had time for 3 classes per semester, so it took me years to complete the pre-requisite courses as well as nursing school. I graduated as an RN in 1988. After working for years in numerous settings, I went back to school to become a Gerontological Nurse Practitioner, graduating in 2010.



**Christina Ramsey, RN,
MSN, GNP-BC, LNCC**



I have worked many jobs during my time in the nursing field. While studying for nursing school, I worked in a hospital to develop my skills. I enjoyed hospital work and worked in the Critical Care Unit for several years. However, my first job as an LPN in 1983 was working in a nursing home. I was drawn to older adults because they are such a vulnerable population in need of expert care. I carry so much respect for their life stories and experiences, and always enjoyed talking to my patients.

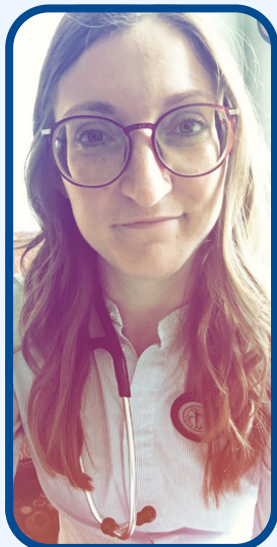
After graduating as an RN and working in the hospital setting, I was drawn back to the nursing home. I felt I was needed there and that I could make a difference in those patients' lives. I worked as the Assistant Director and Director of Nurses in a 224-bed nursing home, with many long hours. This only grew my passion, as I continued to study geriatrics, nursing home regulations, and ways to improve care for older adults. In 1999 I became a Nurse Consultant in Long Term Care. My colleagues felt this role would be suitable for my experience and determination to improve patient care. It was in this position where I learned about the role of a Nurse Practitioner, and my long-term goal of becoming a Gerontological Nurse Practitioner was formed. Once again, I worked full time while going to school, so it took me many years to complete, but I was able to accomplish my dream in 2010 by receiving my GNP certification.



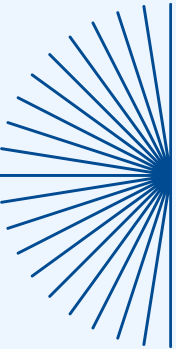


My journey has been filled with an incredible amount of both professional and inner personal rewards. I have been proud of every step in the process of achieving my goals, despite my early setbacks. The initial rejection to nursing school was upsetting, but it also drove me to prove I could accomplish that and more. GAPNA has helped me develop my professional role as a GNP. During my 11 years of membership, I have found that the more I get involved, the more I benefit. I am now part of an association of professionals like me who want to grow and improve the quality of care for older adults. My advice would be to never give up, and don't let anyone hold you back from fulfilling your dreams!

When I was 10 years old, my dream was to be an astronaut. But I have always been destined to be a nurse. My mother was pregnant with me when she went through LPN school, and I was present at her program graduation at 1 week old. I remember her going through RN school while she was pregnant with my first sibling, and I was old enough to remember attending that graduation as well. I then rode with her to patient visits when she was a home health RN. I also volunteered to sit with older adults at Skilled Nursing Facilities when I was young, as I often visited my great-grandmother at one of the facilities.



After seeing all the good (and bad) that came with my great-grandmother being in a SNF, I knew that I wanted to work in Gerontology. My first career was as a Radiologic Technologist, which I did for 4 years. Ultimately not fulfilled in that role, I felt called to nursing. Watching my mother, Lori Grabner, DNP, become an APRN and achieve her DNP inspired me, and I consider her my biggest mentor. I attended Vanderbilt University's bridge APRN program and graduated with my



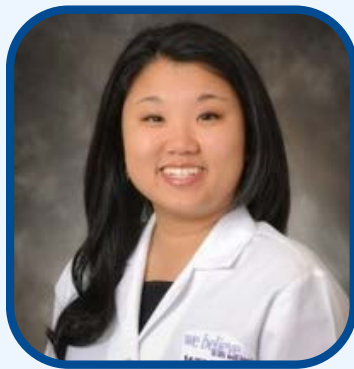
Sarah Ryan, MSN, AGPCNP-BC

MSN in August of 2016.

I live by the quote, "Humankind; be both." Often people lose sight of being human and kind. It is a daily reminder to me that we are all in this together, and being kind makes the world a better place. I believe the older adult population deserves quality and compassionate healthcare. With the support of my colleagues and friends, I've found a professional home in GAPNA that aligns with my mission as a care provider.

Brette Svensson, DNP, MSN, AGPCNP-BC

When I was young, I thought I wanted to be a veterinarian or a marine biologist, but it turns out I really don't like the ocean. I knew I wanted to do something to help people. My first degree took me down the science research path. Feeling unfulfilled with lab life, a family friend suggested nursing school as a secondary degree. After some research I knew this was a good option and started to get excited about my future. My last rotation in my MSN was with an Optum (formerly Evercare) Nurse Practitioner. I loved what she did and fell in love with older adults in the nursing home.



I joined GAPNA as a student member more than 10 years ago. Countless mentors including Carolyn Clevenger, Katherine Abraham Evans, Amy Imes, Stacey Chapman, and Alison Schlenger helped me find my professional home within GAPNA, and it's been my home away from home ever since. GAPNA has taught me, inspired me, and provided endless opportunities which have changed how I approach my career and future as a nurse.



The advice I give is to remember where you came from and give back when you can. Try to see the point of view of others and be open to accepting corrections within yourself. We could all benefit from learning to see things from all sides.



Ladsine Taylor, MSN, APRN, GNP-BC, CDP



My mother told me, “Always remember to do your best at whatever you attempt. We must work hard for what we get. No one owes you anything. We all have talents and abilities. We all are equal, and we all are human. Whatever the situation may be, try to make things better.” When I was 10 years old, I dreamed of being a teacher. It felt like the most natural path for me, since many of my family members were educators, ministers, and business owners. However, my mother introduced me to the career of nursing, which became the perfect fit. I have always had a passion for caregiving and was privileged to care for older adults in my life growing up. As a teenager, I spent my school lunch breaks walking home to prepare lunch for my grandfather and ensure he was taking his medications on time. I was often tasked with helping my senior neighbors with housework, such as sweeping or raking leaves. I enjoyed the sense of responsibility and remember looking forward to everyone’s happy faces greeting me when I arrived at their homes. I still feel their love and compassion and continue to benefit from the wisdom they passed down.



After deciding to pursue nursing school and become a registered nurse, I developed a broader interest in gerontology and became committed to discovering why some people adapt to aging better than others. As a new nurse working at Duke Medical, I was assigned to several older adult patients, and my interest only grew. I witnessed physicians caring for their patients without listening to each patient's concerns and noticed there didn't seem to be a holistic approach to patient care. I began my graduate studies in Epidemiology at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. I was invited to a friend's nursing class at the University of North Carolina Greensboro and after a profound conversation with Dr. Virginia Newbern, Professor of Gerontological Nursing, I decided to pursue my master's degree in Nursing with a specialization in Gerontology. I knew I was destined to work with older adults when I began my master's program. When I mentioned my passion for caring for older adults, my peers told me I was crazy – they thought gerontology was depressing. I didn't let this discourage me and I completed the requirements to become a Gerontological Clinical Nurse Specialist, as well as the inaugural Gerontological Nurse Practitioner program at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. It was through my graduate studies that I met someone I consider a mentor and a friend, Dr. Laurie Kennedy-Malone, who helped me find my home in GAPNA.



I try to live by a biblical principal that, to me, is the foundation and recipe for happiness and success along life's journey, despite any trials or challenges we face - "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these other things will be added unto you." I began my journey with a strong foundation through my parents, extended family, and church family.

I also credit close friends and several professors, both in my undergraduate and graduate studies, as influential mentors. Dr. Laurie Kennedy-Malone, director of the Gerontological Nurse Practitioner program at UNC Greensboro, introduced me to GAPNA while I was studying for my degree, and in turn to Dr. Tomika M. Williams. Tomika has been incredibly pivotal in my life and career since we met in 2017. After being inactive in the nursing community for about 12 years while taking care of my parents, Dr. Williams and I quickly connected over our goals, hopes for the future, and passion for gerontology. She has been consistently supportive and encouraging of me and always finds time to listen. With her help, I developed a goal list to take next steps in my career and accomplished 8 of the 10 goals in a 4-year period. I like to say, "an opportunity is the avenue to expand your possibilities and make it a reality," and GAPNA has presented numerous opportunities to further my career through chapter leadership, board leadership, and an amazing network of support.

She is clothed with strength and dignity, and she laughs without fear of the future. Proverbs 31:25

Cassandra Vannes, DNP, GNP-BC, APRN, GS-C, AOCNP, EBP-C, CPHQ, AGSF, FAHA

As a child, I knew I wanted to be a teacher and a nurse. I used to teach my brothers in our “school” at home after bandaging up my teddy bears while wearing my nurse’s uniform. Nursing was the perfect fit for me since my mother and her sister were both nurses. I enrolled in a junior college nursing program after realizing I didn’t like kids too much - so much for the teaching career!



After spending 9 years in critical care, I knew I wanted to continue my career caring for patients rather than step into a leadership role, and achieved my Master’s Degree as a Nurse Practitioner.

Although many of my peers pursued a Family track, I again not wanting to work with children chose the GNP track.

I found GAPNA when searching for opportunities to engage with the future of gerontological nursing. I am truly among my people here.

I encourage my colleagues to be fearless and live each day giving your most to our profession and to others, not knowing how much time you may have to impact the world. I hope to contribute to bettering the future of gerontology.



When I was 14 years old, I started volunteering during the summers as a candy striper at a level 1 trauma center. My first assignment was on a med/surg unit, and I informally interviewed every staff person who would talk to me about their role in the hospital. While I was also interested in becoming a physician, nursing seemed to be more closely aligned with the kind of hands-on patient care I wanted to deliver. I knew that I could pursue an advanced nursing degree after I completed my bachelors, since nursing offers many ways to specialize and further one's career.

Brittany Woolley, DNP, ANP-C, GS-C, PMHNP-BC, APRN



While I was in nursing school, my grandfather had end-stage renal disease on dialysis, congestive heart failure, and Parkinson's disease. He spent a fair amount of time in the hospital, had many specialty appointments (cardiology, nephrology, neurology), frequented his hemodialysis center 3 times per week, and had various IR procedures. A theme I noticed was that while each provider was well-equipped in their specialty area, none seemed to take a comprehensive approach for the general well-being of the complex geriatric patient.



Since electronic medical records were not widely used at this time, care coordination was lacking. Had he been given the choice to pursue a quality-of-life focus over life-extending measures, I think the final year(s) of his life may have looked quite different. I was only in a BSN program at the time, but before my grandfather passed away, I promised him that I would become an expert in the care of the older adult.

Thank You

To all of our amazing members - we appreciate you sharing your journey with us.

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