



Keep Your Eye on the Prize

MARY ELLEN SANTUCCI PHD, RN
CHAIR/ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
DEPARTMENT OF NURSING

Background

- ▶ Raised in Inner city Philadelphia
- ▶ Parents were married at 16, neither with a high school diploma
- ▶ Father worked 3 different jobs so that both children (my brother and I) could attend Catholic school instead of Philadelphia Public Schools
- ▶ Both my brother and I were High School Graduates.
- ▶ My mother felt that girls only needed a High School diploma because after all they were going to get married and become a homemaker.

Beginning of my post-secondary education

- ▶ In 1979, I found myself a divorced, single mom with an 18 month old son and no job prospects
- ▶ I had to go on public assistance in order to have medical insurance and also be able to take care of my son.
- ▶ I was embarrassed using food stamps.
- ▶ After my first visit to the Welfare office, I knew I could not continue to accept the utter despair I felt during the interview process.

The Journey

- ▶ I started to look for possibilities.
- ▶ I applied and was accepted at a Diploma Nursing Program. I thought I could do this as I had had a job as a nursing assistant in the past.
- ▶ I had no idea how to apply for financial aide. I had several appointments with the financial aide office manager at the school.
- ▶ The hospital had a program where if you worked at the hospital after graduation from their diploma school, they would pay 20% of your loans for every year you worked there. My first 5 years as a nurse were spent at Methodist Hospital.

Diploma School days

- ▶ The first prize I had in mind while attending this school was to get a nursing job at that hospital so that I could afford to attend and graduate with minimal debt.
- ▶ I continued to remain on Public assistance until I graduated from the program.
- ▶ The happiest day of my life, at that point, was being able to walk into the public assistance office and tell them I had a job and no longer needed it.

How did I survive while going to school

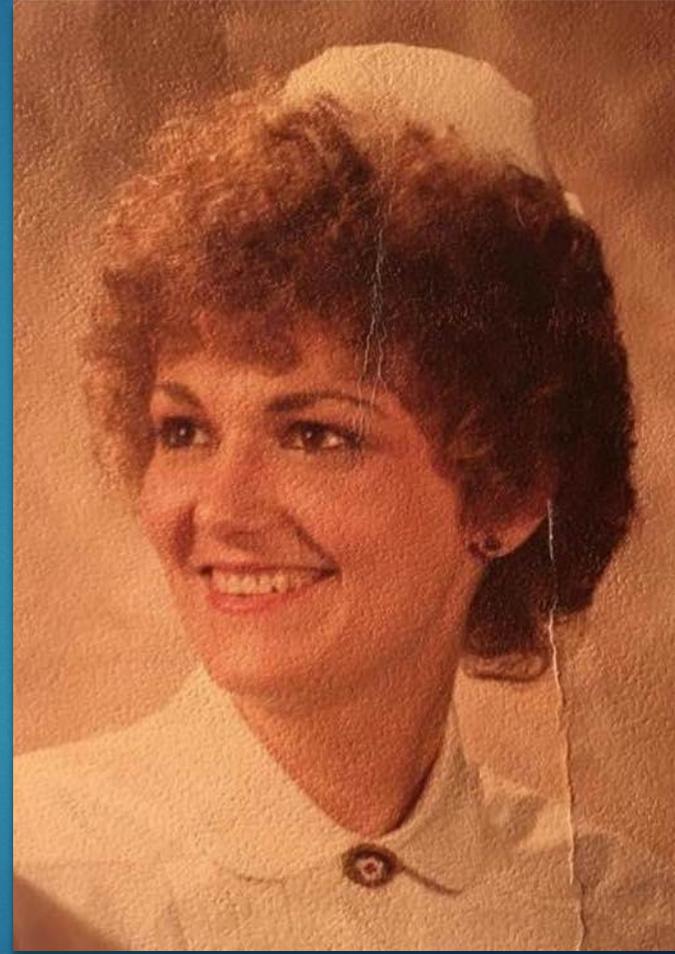
- ▶ I gave blood because the hospital would give 5 meal tickets for every donation. That meant that I could eat lunch at the hospital 5 days out of the month.
- ▶ I worked as a nurse's aide on Saturday nights to supplement my public assistance. It was such a small amount that it did not effect my food stamps or medical coverage.
- ▶ My mother watched my son while I was in school or working. So I did not have to pay for child care.

I was determined to get out of the Public Assistance Program

- ▶ I remained on Public Assistance for the 3 years it took to graduate from the Nursing Diploma Program.
- ▶ By that time I truly hated the Public Assistance Program.
- ▶ I applied for a job at the hospital on the unit where I worked as a nursing assistant. I was hired as a GN and could work as a nurse until passing boards as long as there was an RN to supervise me.

**Methodist Hospital
School of Nursing
Graduation**

May, 1983



Staff Nurse

- ▶ I graduated from the Diploma program and began work within a week of graduation.
- ▶ I took the NCLEX in July. It was a 2 day test using paper and pencil so you did not hear if you passed until late September.
- ▶ I passed and became an RN Staff nurse.
- ▶ As a new RN I had to rotate shifts and rotate weekends.

Personal Life

- ▶ About the time I graduated from Nursing school I met my husband.
- ▶ Victor worked very hard as an installer, refinisher of hardwood floors and did not have any post-secondary education. He had a GED from the army.
- ▶ He and I were married in 1984 and in 1990 he adopted my son.
- ▶ He encouraged me to return to school and achieve as much as I could.

Time to get the BSN

- ▶ Without a BSN, I was limited in the scope of employment as a nurse.
- ▶ After four years of working as a staff nurse, rotating shifts and weekends and holidays, I realized I needed to get my BSN.
- ▶ In September, 1987 I attended the RN to BSN program at Thomas Jefferson University. I switched shifts so that I worked either 7am to 3pm or 11pm to 7am so that I could attend classes in the evening.
- ▶ My employer would pay for one class at a time, therefore it took me until late 1989 to complete my BSN.

Not Planning on an MSN

- ▶ When I went to my Diploma school for an alumni visit, the Director of the Program approached me with a proposal.
- ▶ If I started my MSN program, she could hire me as a Program Assistant in the Nursing Program and pay the tuition for one course at a time.
- ▶ After several discussions with my family and her, I decided to take her up on her proposal.
- ▶ I began graduate study for my MSN as a Clinical Nurse Specialist in Adult Neurologic Rehabilitation at Thomas Jefferson University in 1990.
- ▶ This change allowed me to work full time days with no weekends, no holidays and no rotating shifts.

MSN

- ▶ I finished my MSN at the same time that my son was graduating 8th grade.
- ▶ Upon my 1992 graduation, the Chair of the Department of Nursing at Thomas Jefferson School of Nursing asked to meet with me. I was very nervous and perplexed.
- ▶ During this meeting, she asked me if I considered teaching at a University. I had not as I had no intention to continue towards the doctorate.

MSN

- ▶ The Chair of the Department offered me at position as an Instructor at Thomas Jefferson University with the requirement that I would attain my PhD. She also added that the Department would pay 80% of my tuition for the doctoral program.
- ▶ She saw something in me that I had not envisioned. She remarked to me that my knowledge of nursing coupled with my problem solving ability would benefit the School of Nursing.
- ▶ In the Fall, 1992 I began my new role as Instructor as well as took my first class in the doctoral program at Widener University and began my journey towards my PhD in Nursing Education/Health Promotion.

PhD

- ▶ This journey was probably the longest and hardest journey of my education.
- ▶ Yes, I had support and the finances to continue my education however, my personal life began to change.
- ▶ My husband became disabled and wheelchair bound. His business had to declare bankruptcy. He continued to help me around the house from his wheelchair.

PhD Journey

- ▶ I encountered several nay sayers, who happened to be my teachers.
- ▶ However, there were two faculty in my PhD program who were great mentors.
- ▶ At Widener, part-time study usually means 7 years to get your doctorate, I have to take two leaves of absence during this time. My journey took nine years-one course at a time then collection and analysis of data for my dissertation.

PhD Journey

- ▶ The night before my scheduled dissertation proposal defense, my committee chair called me to tell me she did not think I would be successful. First I cried then I got determined.
- ▶ I spent that night in the library reviewing literature so that I could answer any questions the committee may have.
- ▶ After the proposal defense , it was successful. I fired the chair of my committee and asked another Professor on my committee to chair.

PhD Journey

- ▶ The inner city kid from a so-called poverty stricken neighborhood successfully defended her dissertation on August 31, 2001.
- ▶ My friend, called my husband, after the defense and said to him “Hold for Dr. Santucci”.
- ▶ My husband congratulated me and then said something I will never forget: “You took the name Santucci and have raised it up in a way no other Santucci has”.

Professional Life

- ▶ I have managed to maintain full time employment since the day I graduated from a diploma Nursing school.
- ▶ I have been a 24 year caregiver to my wheel chair bound husband. He passed away in November of 2019. His last words to me were “Keep going!!!!”
- ▶ That 18 month old child on public assistance with his Mom is now a successful attorney.

What kept me going?

- ▶ Determination
- ▶ Persistence
- ▶ A Love of what I was doing.
- ▶ Finding a good mentor

Roadblocks

- ▶ Climb over them
- ▶ Walk around them
- ▶ Hold your head high
- ▶ Sometimes you need to take a detour but I always returned to my mission.



AND

**Always Keep Your Eye
on the Prize**