

## **UW Oshkosh prepares to graduate 5,000th nurse**

**by Shane Arman - Thursday, January 22, 2009**

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When University of Wisconsin Oshkosh nursing professor Mary Ellen Wurzbach reminisces about her journey through the University's first-ever nursing class in 1966, she can't forget the "fruits" of her labor.

One of the first to graduate from the nursing program, Wurzbach practiced her technical skills by giving shots to an orange next to a cozy fireplace. That living room and fireplace are part of the Pollock Alumni House, which now represents the foundation of the nursing program 42 years — and 4,999 nurses — later.

Today, on the verge of the 5,000th nurse graduating from UW Oshkosh, nursing students no longer drip orange juice from their needles. Instead, state-of-the-art learning laboratories with cutting-edge technology are used.

“When I went through the nursing program, it was much different than it is now,” Wurzbach said.

The first 30 nursing program students learned from three professors, who had few technical resources outside of the traditional classroom.

“Today there are many more opportunities for students to practice being a nurse, practice their judgment and practice their skills,” Wurzbach said.

Wurzbach may not have had a clinical simulation laboratory; nevertheless, UW Oshkosh's program provided a solid start to her successful professional career.

“I had excellent teachers in the first program who provided a strong theoretical background,” Wurzbach said.

### **Nursing program evolves**

In contrast, 40 years later, senior Meagan Propson will be the 5,000th nurse to graduate from the program. She chose UW Oshkosh because of the comfort level she felt during a 2005 campus visit.

“The more I found out about the program, the more I liked it,” Propson said.

After the tour, Propson knew she would receive one-on-one time with professors in small classes, an atmosphere she felt was advantageous in learning nursing skills.

As Propson progressed through the program, her professors always were willing to go the extra mile, a trend initiated by the program's original professors.

“I have called professors, and they’ve come back from home to help me,” Propson said.

But unlike the first nursing class, professors today have a plethora of educational resources to facilitate teaching and learning.

“Our learning lab was the equivalent of one mannequin, a blood pressure cuff and a stethoscope,” Wurzbach said.

Today’s learning lab engages student with life-like apparatus. Propson said the lab has simulated model arms containing red fluid which allow students to practice starting IV’s. Students also practice taking the pulse and heartbeat on simulation mannequins and receive immediate feedback on their accuracy.

“It’s really encouraging that they take the time to do that,” Propson said. “It makes you feel more confident when you go out in the hospital, so you’re not doing it for the first time on a patient,” Propson said.

Practice doesn’t necessarily make perfect, but it can help alleviate self-doubt and increase confidence.

“A lot of times students are concerned that they won’t develop enough clinical skills,” Wurzbach said.

Propson said the undergraduate curriculum provides plenty of opportunities to practice nursing, especially compared to the amount of clinical hours her friends get in other nursing programs in Wisconsin.

“UW Oshkosh really is surpassing other programs in that aspect,” Propson said. “It shows a lot about the college that they have clinical agencies that are willing to work with us year after year.”

Clinical opportunities serve as students’ most important bridge between the classroom and the working world because of the hands-on interaction.

“The clinical experience is the best for learning experience,” said Tiffany Gerrits, a December 2008 UW Oshkosh nursing graduate. “We have opportunities to go to a variety of diverse areas that are extremely helpful.”

### **Preparation for tomorrow**

After completing her education in the late 1960s, UW Oshkosh’s first nursing graduate found immediate success. Wurzbach worked at Mercy Medical Center as a staff and charge nurse on the surgical floor and then as a nurse practitioner. She returned to teach at UW Oshkosh in 1980 and earned a nursing doctorate from the University of Minnesota.

As the nursing program has developed over forty-two years, so has the poise of its students.

“The hardest part is feeling the same way that students still feel today,” Wurzbach said. “You want to feel confident by the time you graduate, and I think we do much more toward that goal nowadays.”

UW Oshkosh’s 5,000th nurse has an unknown future ahead of her, but she enters the working world with

peace of mind with regard to the education she received.

“I definitely feel confident,” Propson said. “I feel like the faculty gave us the basis to go out there and be good nurses.”

And just because today’s nursing students aren’t practicing in living rooms next to fireplaces, it doesn’t mean they won’t make their future patients feel right at home.