As we begin a new year, it seems fitting to set aside the constant array of challenges we face in health care staffing and reflect for a moment on the profound impact nurses can have on the life of an individual or family they cared for. Every day, around the clock, patients and nurses are brought together. Through the act of making a patient assignment, a situation is set into action, the potential of which is impossible to fully predict.

There are complex considerations at play when deciding what nurse should work with which patient.

- During the course of a relationship between a patient and a nurse, or a nurse and a patient’s family, remarkable and life-changing interactions can occur.
- The relationship between Patrick Barnes, his family, and the nurses who cared for them, was the inspiration for the creation of the DAISY Foundation.
- The DAISY Award focuses attention on the specific behaviors administrators want to encourage to bring the organization’s vision and values to life.
- DAISY stories, presented publicly, uplift all who hear them.
- We can all learn a lot from the Barnes family story by remembering the power of compassion, the power of gratitude, and the power of recognition.

Probably more often than most realize, during the course of a relationship between a patient and a nurse, or a nurse and a patient’s family, remarkable and life-changing interactions occur. Not from procedures, treatments, the care plan, or part of an order set, but moments that touch someone so deeply a shift occurs and individuals are changed forever.

Some of the stories that come out of the relationships between nurses and patients can make one wonder if there is not some grand design at play. Whatever your beliefs, by placing two people together, one thing is for sure, extraordinary things can happen to impact one life or in some cases many lives. Sometimes, we are aware of this happening and sometimes we are not.

The DAISY Award Story

One such story came to my attention recently when I was introduced to Bonnie and Mark Barnes at a nursing conference. Surrounded by a sea of over 6,000 nurses, the Barnes’, who are not nurses, seemed right at home. They very quickly and skillfully steered the conversation to their passion; recognizing the amazing work of nurses. Bonnie’s clear blue eyes are full of determination. As she speaks about their story you can see signs of the alchemic process that turned pain and suffering into action.

No strangers to action, Bonnie and Mark both have held high-level marketing executive jobs, doing work in many large cities including Los Angeles and New York, Bonnie’s hometown. The Barnes’s are quick to share that before Mark’s son Patrick was hospitalized at the age of 33 for complications associated with idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura, Bonnie and Mark had never really thought much about nurses. Except the occasional TV show or labor disputes in the news, nurses were just not a part of their world, so little attention was given to the profession.

All of that changed while Patrick was hospitalized. During those 8 weeks, Bonnie and Mark were astounded at the intimate relationships that ensued with the nurses assigned to Patrick. They came to appreciate deeply the nurses who so skillfully cared for him and the compassion they showed for both him and for themselves.

Patrick was a two-time survivor of Hodgkin’s disease. However, this time, surrounded by family and a team of caring nurses, Patrick passed away. Patrick had always been driven by a desire to help others. This wonderful characteristic would very much influence what occurred next.

“What we felt when Patrick died was this incredible heartbreak countered by a sense of awe about this incredible care he had received,” said Bonnie Barnes.
The calling of Pat’s nurses touched us so deeply. Before this experience, we had no idea what this profession of nursing was, and here they helped us through the worst weeks of our lives” (B. Barnes, personal communication, December 21, 2011).

As the Barnes family contemplated what they wanted to do in Pat’s memory, the one thing they kept coming back to was the profound gratitude they felt for the nurses who cared for Patrick. Bonnie said, “We kept asking ourselves, how do we express the gratitude we feel for the work nurses do every day helping patients and their families” (B. Barnes, personal communication, December 21, 2011). It was these experiences, combined with a desire to honor Patrick’s passion for helping others, which gave birth to the DAISY Foundation.

DAISY, an acronym for Diseases Attacking the Immune System, was formed immediately after Patrick’s death in 1999. Today, across 50 states and 7 countries, there are 1,017 health care facilities committed to the DAISY Award. Over 130,000 nurses have been nominated for the DAISY Award and more than 20,000 nurses have been chosen as DAISY honorees. The foundation has gained the support of major nursing associations, including the American Organization of Nurse Executives, American Nurses Credentialing Center, American Association of Critical-Care Nurses, American Association of Colleges of Nurses, American Assembly of Men in Nursing, National League for Nursing, and Sigma Theta Tau International. The foundation has strong support from outside the health care industry who are committed to their cause including an unusual sponsor, Cinnabon®. The cinnamon rolls were one of Patrick’s favorite treats and on hearing the intention of the DAISY Foundation to recognize nurses, they joined the cause enthusiastically.

Today, more than a decade since its inception, the DAISY Foundation says thank you to nurses in three ways:

1. Through the DAISY Award, honoring the super-human work nurses do in direct care of patients and families every day.
2. By funding nursing research through the J. Patrick Barnes Grants for Nursing Research and Evidence-Based Practice Projects.
3. By honoring nursing faculty with the DAISY Faculty Award.

The Barnes’ family home has been converted into “DAISY World Headquarters” and bustles with activity. Boxes line the front porch waiting the UPS truck’s daily visit, picking up and distributing DAISY Awards worldwide. What looks to be bedrooms are taken over with desks, papers, computers, and boxes of award materials.

Stacks of carefully wrapped stone sculptures, hand-carved by artists of the Shona Tribe in Zimbabwe, take up much of one room. Called the “Healers Touch,” it is one of the items award recipients receive. The purchase of these sculptures, from Zimbabwe, a country with 95% unemployment, means the 14 artists who carve these beautiful symbols of caring can support themselves and hundreds of people in their extended families. As Bonnie likes to say, “This is the power of nursing reaching around the world and affecting the lives of so many people.”

In another room is a collection of what seems to be hundreds of cards, statues, trinkets, and jewelry, all somehow representing a daisy flower that the Barnes have received in gratitude from the nurses and hospitals who have been touched by their work. For Bonnie and Mark, the DAISY Foundation has not only taken over their home, but has become a full-time effort, embraced lovingly.

How Does the DAISY Award Work?

Nurses are nominated by a patient, a patient’s family member, physician, colleague, or other member of the care team. Selection criteria are established at each site based on the values of the organization. The DAISY Foundation requests the recipient demonstrate great clinical skills and leadership skills, but also a strong sense of compassion for patients and their families.

Over the past 12 years, since the DAISY Foundation was started, many lives have been impacted and much has been learned. The idea of offering gratitude to nurses turned out to be much more difficult than the Barnes’s anticipated. With a bit of a heavy heart, Mark will tell you the most common response they get from nurses who receive the award is “I didn’t do anything special; I was just doing my job.” “And they say this after a story of their work has been told that brought tears to the eyes of everyone who heard it. Not doing anything special?! It’s hard for me to comprehend,” says Mark. “Nurses must take this work for granted, but their patients and families surely do not” (B. Barnes, personal communication, December 21, 2011).

Mark notes, “When we piloted the DAISY Award, we thought the program would be nurses nominating nurses. We saw quite quickly that we weren’t getting very many nominations. It seemed nurses didn’t think their colleagues were doing anything particularly wonderful, so why would they nominate each other? When we opened the nominations up to patients, their families, physicians, other colleagues, nominations came in by the armload” (M. Barnes, personal communication, October 25, 2011). Bonnie is concerned nurses really are often out of touch with the huge impact they are having.

At one point in the early days of the program, they gave nurse awardees a gift certificate for a massage at a local spa until they learned the nurses weren’t using them. Confused by the situation, they reached out to the chief nursing officer (CNO) of a Los
Angeles hospital and asked, “What’s wrong with this?” Nurses ooh and ahh when the massage is announced at the award presentation, but then they don’t take the time to go have the massage? The CNO replied, “What’s really important about DAISY is not the gifts, it’s about the recognition!”

This was an epiphany for the Barnes’s that has been demonstrated in the countless award ceremonies they have attended across the country. Bonnie and Mark have come to understand that recognition in and of itself is very powerful. When nurses are thanked in a meaningful way, even though they don’t expect to be, they seem to be even more inspired to be better, both in terms of their clinical care as well as the way they deliver that care – the compassion they provide and the contact they make with their patients and families.

Some ideas that have now become DAISY traditions came from participating hospitals. For example, Genesys Regional Medical Center in Grand Blanc, MI, created a daisy pin for DAISY nominees which the nurses loved, so the Barnes adopted this practice and have distributed over 130,000 Daisy nominee pins. Another, Providence St. Vincent’s Hospital in Portland, OR, hung a banner congratulating their DAISY honoree. The Barnes’, who were in attendance as they often are, were brought to tears. Banners are now given to every participating facility.

Receiving the DAISY Award

One might think that to get nominated for and receive a DAISY Award, the nurse was involved in a heroic event. This is possibly true if we rethink our definition of heroic. One of my favorite stories that Bonnie shared was a nurse who was nominated for getting an elderly and dying patient a plate of fruit. The patient had been asking for days, but this particular nurse took her request seriously and saw it through. This simple act of kindness elicited such deep gratitude in this patient that, as weak as she was, she went out of her way to be sure her nurse was recognized.

Several DAISY Awards have been given to nurses who have arranged for romance in the hospital, a rather unlikely setting. DAISY nurses have organized beautiful weddings for hospitalized patients who were terminally ill. A nurse was honored for caring for a couple who had been married for over 60 years and were both severely injured in a car accident. This nurse arranged for them to be in ICU beds next to each other where they could hold hands, until they each passed away within moments of each other.

DAISY nurses have shown incredible empathy and compassion, as they did to the Barnes family. A mom whose baby was born with a rare and devastating birth defect nominated her nurse because when the baby went into surgery for what was to be a 9-hour operation, the mom collapsed on the floor in tears.

Her baby’s nurse sat down on the floor with her, held her while she cried, and “kept her heart from breaking.” Another great example: a patient who claimed his nurse “saved his life.” She did not do this by virtue of her clinical excellence. Rather, when he refused to get out of bed after heart surgery to begin his rehab, she came to his room on her day off and would not leave until he got up and took his first steps. Her not very gentle push made him work through his depression and turned his desire to die into a strong will to live.

DAISY’s Impact

When these stories are read in the unit as part of the DAISY Award celebration, the impact is felt by all. Having attended an untold number of DAISY Awards, the Barnes’ knew their program was making a difference in health care organizations. But in 2010, they felt it was time to get the evidence underpinning its success. Their question: What does all this recognition actually do for nurses and their organizations?

Research into the impact of the DAISY Award was conducted pro bono by Cindy Lefton, PhD, RN, vice president of organizational consulting at Psychological Associates in St. Louis, MO. Independent of the DAISY Foundation, this study gauged the impact of this type of meaningful recognition in 20 DAISY Award sites in the United States. It concluded the DAISY Award is having a tangible effect, shaping and driving organizational culture from the bedside to the C-suite.

By revealing all the “right” that goes on in patient care, as opposed to all the “wrong” nurses and health care administrators are trained to focus on, the DAISY Award is focusing attention on the specific behaviors administrators want to encourage to bring the organization’s vision and values to life. DAISY stories, presented publicly, uplift all who hear them. They instill pride in nurses: in themselves, their colleagues, and their profession.

These DAISY stories and the tributes paid to the honorees remind nurses why they became nurses to begin with, and they reinforce among administrators and executives why they come to work every day. DAISY nominations give voice to patients, families, and colleagues as they describe “extraordinary nurses” and add narrative depth to survey scores. “These experiences have helped us see that our gratitude to nurses has gone beyond our expectations,” says Bonnie Barnes (B. Barnes, personal communication, December 21, 2011).

On Recognition and Gratitude

Back 12 years ago, in a hospital in Seattle, some nurses were assigned to care for Patrick Barnes. What happened during the 8 weeks of Patrick’s hospitaliza-
tion, no one could have predicted. The managers who assigned nurses to Patrick Barnes could not have known that the nurses who participated in his care, along with Patrick and the Barnes family, were collectively initiating something, through their experiences together, that would eventually touch nurses across the world.

The outpouring of gratitude the Barnes family has for the incredible work nurses do has turned one family’s experience into a gift and inspiration for so many. The Barnes story is an example of the countless ways people show their gratitude to nurses. While not all gratitude stories may seem as grand as the DAISY story, even the smallest and most intimate moment of gratitude between two people can be powerful beyond measure.

As we enter a new year, full of challenges and unknowns, we can all learn a lot from the Barnes family story by remembering the power of compassion, the power of gratitude, and the power of recognition. §

Staffing Unleashed

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