

follow the LEADER

Four Ontario RNs at different stages of their careers tell us what inspires them to guide, mobilize and motivate others. BY JILL SCARROW

Nursing leaders can be found at all ages and stages of their careers. Although, traditionally, leadership has been associated with executive directors and vice-presidents, it isn't always attached to a specific job title.

Colleen McKey is past-president of the Nursing Leadership Network, an interest group of RNAO. She is also the director of the McMaster University School of Nursing's Leadership and Management program for health professionals. "Leadership is in all of us... whether we're in a clinical practice setting, research or education," she says. "Leadership is pervasive regardless of the role."

Poonam Sharma, Amanda Leroux, Valerie Parkes and Carole Devine are bringing McKey's words to life every day. Respectively, they are a student whose volunteerism brings better health to her peers, a new graduate whose green approach at work is inspiring others, an RN whose encouragement compels colleagues to embrace challenge, and a nurse using her political skills to make her community a better place. While their experiences differ, they all share common traits that define leadership. They have a vision for the future, a proactive frame of mind that motivates them to achieve their goals, and the communication, teamwork and mentorship skills to make change a reality.

Here are their stories ...

Guidance
QUALITIES OF A LEADER
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ABILITY
Leadership
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Direction
ACTIONS
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Conduct
leaders collectively

Poonam Sharma is not yet an RN, but her vision to improve the health of her fellow students has made her a leader far beyond the classroom. During her first year in the collaborative nursing degree program at Humber College, Sharma was a peer health mentor to her classmates, promoting healthy eating and safe sex. This year, she's helping students both in and out of her program to quit smoking by heading up the school's *Leave the Pack Behind* program. Sharma believes nurses – and aspiring nurses who may not have as much clinical experience – can use their leadership skills to make others' lives healthier.

Part of the reason Sharma is so motivated and eager to volunteer at Humber is because of the inspiration she's received from mentors. One of those mentors is RNAO Immediate Past President Mary Ferguson-Paré, who encouraged Sharma to become

an RN when the two worked together at Toronto Rehab. At the time, Sharma was coordinator of a dental program and most of her work focused on improving the lives of people living with physical and cognitive disabilities. She provided oral-care education for her patients and colleagues, and implemented infection control procedures. Ferguson-Paré saw qualities in her that would transfer to nursing.

Today, Sharma offers her leadership skills to RNAO as student executive member for the Peel chapter and as a nurse ambassador who educates high school students about a career in nursing. She is also an RNAO liaison in Humber's Nursing Society. This fall, she led efforts at her school to recruit more than 300 nursing students to become members of the association. It's that work that's earned her the moniker of 'RNAO girl' on campus. **RN**



Poonam Sharma
Student at the University of
New Brunswick-Humber College



Amanda Leroux
Intensive Care RN
Queensway-Carleton Hospital (QCH)

Amanda Leroux has always envisioned herself as a leader. Before becoming an RN, she was an RPN at a Peterborough retirement home and was the go-to person for health-care aides who had patient care questions. During her four years as a student at Trent University, she continued to lead as she worked towards her BScN, holding several positions on student council. Leroux admits, however, that once she graduated and was surrounded by colleagues with extensive clinical experience, her confidence began to wane. Suddenly, she was the person with all the questions.

“It was a real culture shock for me to move into the RN role,” she recalls. “It was me who needed to go to people.”

Fortunately, her insecurity didn't last. In fact, her confidence came back in spades last March when Leroux attended a conference hosted by the Nursing Leadership Network (NLN). She was inspired when she heard a keynote speaker talk about how all nurses can command attention and get things done, regardless of rank or seniority.

“The conference gave me the impetus

to take charge...without being in a formal leadership role,” she says. “It made me realize that just because I was inexperienced in terms of my clinical experience, that didn't mean I didn't have something else I could offer.” With an idea, determination, and a team committed to the cause, Leroux launched a project in her workplace that may not have been clinically focused, but enacted her vision of making QCH a more environmentally friendly place.

Over the course of several months, Leroux met with the hospital's environmental services department to launch a blue box program. She organized education sessions with colleagues, and, on Sept. 1, staff began sorting their paper, plastics, glass and cans into containers on Leroux's unit.

A new 'Green Team' has been formed and Leroux hopes to expand the program hospital-wide. She also hopes to do some 'recycling' of her own next year when she returns to the NLN conference to present details of her project to the group of nurses who inspired her to take it on in the first place. **RN**

For RN Valerie Parkes (second from left) one of the best ways to demonstrate leadership is to help others see the potential in themselves. That's why she is always encouraging her colleagues to develop their knowledge and build their expertise so they can provide the best patient care. Parkes knows from personal experience that it sometimes takes a co-worker to kick-start your career. In the late 90s, she was working as an RN at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre when a manager encouraged her to return to school to earn her BScN. Parkes was interested in a more senior role but was worried that, with three sons, a return to the classroom may not be possible. It took a colleague to show her it was, although earning the degree wasn't easy. It meant a lot of late nights and vacation days spent in the classroom.

Today, Parkes is a patient care manager at West Park Healthcare Centre and frequently encourages others to return to school to earn their degrees. She also offers personal support workers encouragement if they are considering a switch to nursing. Some women, she says, think they can't return to school because they are single mothers, and can't afford to take time away from work. She reminds them that working on their education sets a good example for their children. She also makes sure they know about tuition funding, and helps them secure time off when school obligations have to come first. More education, she tells them, can be a springboard toward career success down the road.

Parkes recalls mentoring one RPN who was initially worried about going back to earn her nursing degree. Today, that same nurse is preparing to write her acute-care nurse practitioner exam. “I always tell people – until you get started, you can never see the finish line.” **RN**



Valerie Parkes
Patient Care Manager
West Park Healthcare Centre

RNAO inspires new grads to lead by example

Leigh Chapman, an RN and manager for RNAO's Centre for Professional Nursing Excellence, says when new nurses start their careers, it's not uncommon for them to find the leadership skills they learned at school take a back seat as they adjust to their new work environments. Helping new grads and nursing students move beyond their apprehensions and tap into their leadership expertise was the goal of RNAO's first-ever workshop called *Thriving in the Work Environment: Leadership for New Grads*.

The day-long session was led by Chapman in partnership with Jessica Peterson, a PhD student whose work examines job satisfaction among new grads. Approximately 80 participants spent the day reviewing what theorists have written about the leap from the education system into the working world. The group also talked amongst themselves about common challenges, the qualities of a true leader, and how they can demonstrate leadership in their own careers.

Chapman and Peterson used RNAO's *Developing and Sustaining Nursing Leadership* best practice guideline to show participants how to create workplaces that are better not only for their own personal well-being, but also that of their co-workers and their patients.

They discussed the value of adopting the leadership practices recommended in the BPG, especially those that pertain to building relationships with co-workers. The guideline was developed under the leadership of University of Western Ontario nursing professor Heather Laschinger.

Former Ontario resident and new grad Rosabella Vito travelled to Toronto from Calgary for the workshop. She says it helped her overcome some of the jitters she's been feeling since she started working last spring. "I think there's a huge gap between being a student and actually working. I felt overwhelmed that I was responsible for a person's health and life."

Vito says the workshop gave her the chance to learn more about the transformational leadership practices described in the BPG. It also got her thinking about how she can show more leadership in her own work through reflective practice that will help her identify different areas she needs to work on.

"I realized I should be more proactive and be internally motivated and look for personal development ... I can review the concepts on my own and work on my weaknesses," she says. The workshop will be offered again next October. Visit www.rnao.org in 2009 for details. **RN**

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Carole Devine
Executive Director
Supples Landing Retirement Home

Carole Devine (second from right) always tries to remain optimistic when others around you are struggling to see the silver lining of a bad situation. This fall, the Pembroke RN ran as a Liberal candidate in the federal election. When the polls showed she wasn't going to win, her focus was not on feeling negative, but staying upbeat for the volunteers who helped her door-knock and put up lawn signs. Even though she wasn't the front runner in her riding, Devine kept reminding her team that they were doing important work by presenting voters with a different choice on their ballot.

"(Anyone) can lead on a good day," she says. "It's the mark of a [true] leader to lead on bad days."

A mother of three, Devine decided to run for MP because she got a taste of politics as a school board trustee in the 90s, and was eager to get involved again, now that her

children are grown. She knew she had the teamwork and communication skills because of her experience as a nurse. But, like any good leader, she also knew she was going to have to learn new things on the fly. She says her biggest challenges were learning to be on the attack during all-candidates debates, and summarizing her party's platform into two-minute statements.

Now that the votes have been counted and her opponent has taken office, Devine is thinking about the next challenge. She's not quite sure yet what that will be. Even though she lost the election, she says there are plenty of people who expect she will do something to help improve their community. And she approaches that expectation with the same optimism she showed on the campaign trail. "I entered this process to make a better world. I still have that task," she says. "I just have to look at it in a different way." **RN**