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Navigating the Path to Nursing Leadership

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I have been passionate about caring for others since I was young and aspired to make a difference. As a girl, I admired my mother, who thrived as a Social Worker. I enjoyed volunteering on the weekends and spending quality time with beautifully aging adults. I was destined to continue healing by becoming a Registered Nurse and helping others not only survive, but flourish.

Through my desire to help others, I began studying nursing at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. On December 19, 2011, tragedy struck when my Dad slipped and fell. He was rushed to the hospital and received emergency spinal cord surgery. The care my father received throughout his hospital stay was world-class. The amount of encouragement and the level of support through various therapies and counseling paved the way for a remarkable recovery.

I earned my Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree from Xavier in 2012. The supportive professors, small class sizes, and nurturing environment taught me the importance of promoting the whole person's health. Upon graduation, I returned home to help care for my father and assist my family. I drove my Dad to doctor's appointments, therapy sessions, and unexpected visits to the Emergency Department. He constantly suffered

from neuropathy and paralysis. I wanted to do anything to take away his pain, and he told me our time together eased the burden.

Professionally, I received my first nursing position in 2012 with the Cleveland Clinic at Fairview Hospital, a Magnet-recognized facility. As a new graduate, I provided bedside nursing care to six patients on a Medical-Surgical Telemetry Unit. My commitment to knowing each patient's story allowed me to build rapport and provide individualized care. My unit was a Primary Stroke Center, and I assisted patients on the emotional and physical journey of recovery. Medical-surgical nursing was rewarding and sparked an interest in trauma. After two years at home helping my Dad with his rehabilitation and working full-time as a Registered Nurse caring for stroke patients, I relocated to California.

Once in San Diego, I began working on the Trauma Progressive Care Unit (PCU) at UC San Diego Health in 2014 and found joy in advocating for vulnerable populations. As a Level I Trauma Center, the unit serves patients of various ages, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds subject to tragic accidents. Trauma patients are critical medically but also can be unpredictable, agitated, and even violent. I became more resilient in this team-based environment and further



Stephanie Chmielewski, MSN, MSCJ, RN, PCCN, HNB-BC, has worked as a Registered Nurse on the Trauma Progressive Care Unit at Hillcrest Medical Center since 2014. She transitioned into leadership in 2021. Before UC San Diego Health, she worked as a Registered Nurse at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. Stephanie was recognized as the 2020 UC San Diego Health "Clinical Nurse of the Year." She received a 2022 "Circle of Excellence" award through the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses for skilled communication, true collaboration, and effective decision-making. Stephanie is a Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) student at Xavier University, aspiring to improve healthcare policy for vulnerable patient populations. She is passionate about traveling and has visited all seven continents.

developed my communication and collaboration skills.

Coming to the Trauma PCU as a newer nurse, I was eager to learn. I first started attending the Unit Based Quality Council (UBQC) meetings in 2014 and participating in educational learning opportunities. I became more confident in my nursing abilities and started working as a Resource Nurse on the night shift. I transitioned to the day shift after two years of working nights. With my enthusiasm for safety and quality improvement, I was nominated to Chair the UBQC, which I served for two years. I began assisting with Resource shifts on the day shift, then transitioned to a relief Charge Nurse. I expanded my participation in hospital-wide initiatives by attending Clinical Practice Council (CPC) meetings in 2017. I was eventually nominated for the Co-Chair role in 2018 and served for one year. I progressed to the Chair role in 2019 and served for two years. As the Chair, I collaborated with interdisciplinary teams to implement evidence-based organization-wide changes. I served as the Communication Officer for the Professional Development Committee (now the Clinical Nurse Advancement Council (CNAC)) in 2019 for a year and a half. I also served as Communication Officer for the Holistic Integrative Nursing Committee for six months, then as Co-Chair for one year before the committee disbanded in June 2022.

After serving as a caregiver for my father, who suffered a traumatic spinal cord injury in 2011, I was motivated to improve spinal care at UC San Diego Health. A spinal cord protocol did not exist, creating a lack of confidence and a knowledge deficit for the nursing staff. With my passion for personal and organizational improvement, I spearheaded a team-oriented initiative to create the “Trauma Spinal Cord Injury Clinical Practice Guidelines.” The document focuses on the body’s systemic care utilizing interdisciplinary collaboration.

Moreover, I assisted with forming the Spinal Cord Injury Committee (now the Brain and Spine Rehabilitation Committee (BSRC)) to enhance the inpatient spinal cord rehabilitation experience. The collaborative group of nursing,

advanced practice providers, physicians, and respiratory, occupational, and physical therapists meet monthly to review patient cases to improve spinal care. My initiative helped me advance to a Clinical Nurse III. As a result of my hard work, I was recognized as the overall 2020 UC San Diego Health Clinical Nurse of the Year.

Excitingly, I am in the process of publishing my manuscript on the spinal project to share my research, experiences, and recommendations for care. My collaborative work was presented as a poster at the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) National Teaching Institute (NTI) and Critical Care Exposition in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in May 2023. I was a podium presenter at the 29th International Congress through the International Council of Nurses (ICN) in Montreal, Canada, in July 2023. I also presented at the podium at the 34th Sigma International Nursing Research Congress in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, in July 2023. Disseminating the collaborative spinal cord injury initiatives internationally was an exciting experience.

Humbly, I was promoted to

Assistant Nurse Manager in December 2021. Caring for trauma patients and leading my team has been a dream come true. Excitingly, I received a 2022 Circle of Excellence Award through the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses. The organization recognized me for my skilled communication, true collaboration, and effective decision-making.

I graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) and a Master of Science in Criminal Justice (MSCJ) from Xavier University in May 2022. In the fall of 2022, I began my Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) in Population Health Leadership at Xavier, and my goal is to graduate in December 2024. My mission is to promote holistic health through research, innovation, and compassion. Participating in patient and family-centered care is at the heart of my nursing practice. I hope to positively impact my patients, colleagues, and the larger nursing community. My DNP degree will allow me to serve marginalized and at-risk populations. I am eager to continue improving the exceptional care at UC San Diego Health.

Photograph by Lia Trageser, RN, BSN

