

## **Center for Nursing Advocacy: On the Front Lines Protecting Nursing's Image**

by Diane Pineiro-Zucker

"Registered Nurses are the critical front-line caregivers in health care today. For millions of people worldwide, nurses are the difference between life and death, self-sufficiency and dependency, hope and despair. Yet a true lack of appreciation for nursing has led to a shortage that is one of the most urgent public health crises."

With those words, the Center for Nursing Advocacy introduces a Web site ([www.nursingadvocacy.org](http://www.nursingadvocacy.org)) dedicated to improving nursing's image in media around the world. The Center is a small organization with a big Web site, and is run by one much-more-than-full-time volunteer from her home in Baltimore, Maryland. Executive Director Sandy Summers has part-time help from her husband Harry Jacobs Summers, the organization's senior advisor and writer, and from her brother Jack Summers, a part-time Webmaster.

"The nursing shortage requires, first of all, that we improve our media image. People don't understand what nurses do to save lives," Summers says. The Center's mission, she explains, is to tell the media and the public what nurses really do. "We analyze the media's treatment of nurses and organize nurses to respond, helping nurses stand together to end harmful depictions and encourage good ones."

### **Fighting Demeaning Stereotypes**

Rather than submit to bad or mediocre coverage in the media and inaccurate and demeaning portrayals on television, nurses need to drive media coverage, Summers says, pointing to a 1997 study by Sigma Theta Tau International, the Honor Society of Nursing. According to the "Woodhull Study on Nursing and the Media," conducted by the University of Rochester School of Nursing, "On average, nurses were cited only three percent of the time in hundreds of health-related articles culled from 16 major news publications." A 1991 study by Buresh, Gordon, and Bell ("Who Counts in News Coverage of Health Care," *Nursing Outlook*, Sept./Oct. 1991, Vol. 39 No.5) found those numbers were closer to 1%.

The Center's first project, and one that still leads the pack on a list of letter-writing campaigns on the organization's Web site, focused on the popular television show "ER." "The show's portrayal of nurses, while positive in some ways, has been inadequate and inaccurate in important respects," according to the Center's Web site.

Despite numerous letters and a conference call with the show's producers, little has changed, Summers says. "It might take thousands of letters to really have an impact. We hope NYSNA members will join our campaign and write to the makers of 'ER.'"

### **Letter-Writing Campaigns**

"ER" may not have begun to listen, but Summers isn't about to stop trying to make them change. The Center's current letter-writing campaigns include:

- A call on NBC's "Passions" producers to end their use of an orangutan "nurse" named "Precious" in the supernatural daytime soap opera.
- A plea to NBC's "Scrubs" that "nursing is not all about shutting up and following physicians' orders."
- A point of information to CBS's "Judging Amy" producers that physicians can't fire nurses.

The Center does not hesitate to applaud positive media portrayals when they occur. It recently issued its list of the best and worst media portrayals of nursing during 2003. The list highlights a variety of depictions of nursing – "from television to the print media, from fiction to news, and from Milwaukee to Malaysia" – that the Center believes deserve recognition.

### **The Top 10**

Among the top 10 positive portrayals are Tony Kushner's "Angels in America" on HBO, a series of columns by Ronnie Polaneczky in the Philadelphia Daily News highlighting the plight of nurses striking the Medical College of Pennsylvania over the practice of forced overtime, and two prominent stories in the Reader's Digest on the nursing crisis, one of which featured a tough day in the working life of a NYSNA RN.

Topping a list of the 10 worst portrayals of nursing in 2003 is "My Fifteen Seconds," an episode of "Scrubs" written by Mark Stegemann, "which purports to teach nurse Carla Espinosa (Judy Reyes) that nursing is all about doing what physicians tell you."

The Center points to two victories in 2003. As a result of a Center campaign that led to strong protests from nurses, Proctor & Gamble pulled a Clairol Herbal Essences commercial depicting a carefree female nurse leaving her patient unmonitored as she washes her hair in his bathroom before dancing in his room. Unfortunately, Summers recently heard that the commercial is still airing in Canada and said efforts are underway to have it pulled from the airwaves there as well.

Another victory came in February 2003 when New Zealand nursing leader Anita Bamford and colleagues successfully challenged New Zealand's Lion Brewery to discontinue an advertising campaign involving female "nurses" in short dresses entertaining spectators at rugby matches.

The Center's future is likely to be marked by a succession of victories eroding the negative images and changing the public's perceptions — one media image at a time. But they need nurses to sign on in greater numbers to have a bigger effect. "It's like a union," Summers says. "Nurses can change things when they work together."

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