

Editorial

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A Gift to Yourself

For Nurses Week, support the Center for Nursing Advocacy.

In the late 1980s, at the height of that decade's nursing shortage, some nurses attributed the problem of attracting and retaining nurses to the media's abysmal portrayals of nurses. Two of us, Claire Fagin and Pam Maraldo, approached the Pew Charitable Trusts with an idea for a media campaign to teach the public about nursing. The National League for Nursing (NLN) received the Pew grant in 1988 to direct the project, which we called Nurses of America, with the endorsement of the Tri-Council for Nursing (a coalition of the ANA, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, the American Organization of Nurse Executives, and the NLN).

Over the next few years, we scrutinized nursing images of and messages about nursing on television and in the print media, examining how often nurses were cast in main story lines and how they were depicted, while keeping a careful lookout for all the negative stereotypes: the Nurse Ratcheds and the doctor servants. We also launched a program disseminating research conducted by nurses, emphasizing its impact on patient outcomes. And we used public service announcements, ads, and speeches to explain the value of nurses to media across the country.

We trained nurses nationwide in delivering these messages, developed a proposal for a television talk show series with

nurses as hosts, held press lunches for high-level science writers, and visited with editorial boards of major newspapers to discuss examples of nursing's contribution to health care.

The zenith of the Nurses of America campaign came in 1990, when various grass-roots nursing campaigns persuaded NBC executives to cancel the noxious television show *The Nightingales*, which depicted nurses prancing around in scant undies by night and cooing at physicians by day. Not only were the nurses sexpots (which in itself might not have done much harm, considering what *Ben Casey* did for the image of physicians), but most unacceptable of all was the projection of the nurses as dimwits. We arranged a meeting with NBC's then-CEO, Brandon Tartikoff, to voice our objections. His blasé attitude convinced us that we needed a campaign aimed at the show's sponsors. Nurses of America organized a letter-writing campaign barraging the show's advertisers with nearly 1,000 letters of strong disapproval. Nurses all over the country threatened to boycott the products if advertisers continued to sponsor the show. As advertising support withered, *The Nightingales* sputtered and was finally canceled.

Nurses of America did not continue after the grant ended in 1991. More than 10 years later, another nursing shortage has become a major public health crisis, and media portrayals of nurses

and nursing have again taken a turn for the worse in such television programs as *ER* and the soap opera *Passions*. For more information visit www.nursingadvocacy.org.

Nurses must sustain a collective effort to shape media portrayals of nursing. Founded in 2001, the Center for Nursing Advocacy has emerged to take on the issue and deserves the support of all nurses. Staffed by only three people and funded through membership dues, the organization is monitoring and responding to media depictions of nurses in print, on television, in films, and elsewhere. You can support the center's efforts to support nurses. First, go to the Web site and become a dues-paying member. Second, respond to the center's calls to respond to negative portrayals of nurses. As a member, you'll receive an e-mail alert highlighting both laudable and dismal portrayals, with sample letters or e-mails that you can send to television or film producers and journalists. Third, you can volunteer to represent the center in your workplace. Go to the Web site to sign up. As a volunteer, you'll work to rally your colleagues to write such letters and e-mails.

To celebrate National Nurses Week, honor yourself and your colleagues by supporting the Center for Nursing Advocacy. ▼



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