SHU Nursing Faculty Awarded Diamond Jubilee Awards for the Second Consecutive Year

Anne M. Barker, Sacred Heart University
For the second consecutive year, two members of the Sacred Heart University’s College of Health Professions faculty, Anne Barker, Ed.D., R.N., and Shery Watson, M.S.N., R.N., will be honored with Diamond Jubilee Awards from the Connecticut Nurses’ Association for excellence in their fields.

The awards represent the highest honor that the nursing profession in Connecticut can bestow, according to www.ctnurses.org. The awards will be presented at the 105th annual CNA convention on Oct. 27 at the Crowne Plaza in Cromwell, CT.

Dr. Barker, the chair of the SHU’s Department of Nursing, will receive the Josephine A. Dolan Award for Outstanding Contributions to Nursing Education and Prof. Watson, a clinical assistant professor of Nursing, will receive the Florence S. Wald Award for Outstanding Contributions to Nursing Practice. In 2010, SHU’s Susan DeNisco, D.N.P., and Julie Stewart, D.N.P., were the honorees.

Both Dr. Barker and Prof. Watson are honored to be singled out by their colleagues. “I am very pleased that the nomination came from the faculty,” said Dr. Barker, who has been department chair for three years. And Prof. Watson said, “I was surprised because I hold my colleagues with high esteem. I am very honored, but don’t find myself as deserving as they are.”

Dr. Barker received an Ed.D. in Nursing Executive Role from Teachers College, Columbia University, a Master of Science in Cardiovascular Nursing from Catholic University of America, and a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from the University of Virginia. She has served on the faculty at Sacred Heart University since 1987. She is the author of three books on transformational leadership - Transformational Nursing Leadership: A Vision for the Future; Leadership in Dietetics: Achieving a Vision for the Future; and Leadership Role Competencies for Clinical Manager. Prior to joining Sacred Heart, she worked for the Department of Veterans
Affairs for 15 years and was the chief nursing officer for six years. She is glad she made the move into nursing education. “I like working with the students,” said Dr. Barker, a native of Washington, D.C.

That interest in educating future nurses and nurse leaders also is evident to Dr. Susan DeNisco, an associate professor and the director of the graduate Nursing programs at SHU, who nominated Dr. Barker for the CNA award. “Anne has been able to share her expertise, passion, and commitment to nursing to inspire the new generation of health care providers and nurse leaders. Besides all her wealth of expertise in nursing leadership, education and curriculum design, Dr. Barker has numerous scholarly activities which are a credit to her philosophy that disseminating information to others is the way to make changes.”

Two years after Dr. Barker arrived at Sacred Heart, the department was undergoing an accreditation process and the consultant called it “a sleepy little RN-to-BSN program.’ I remember how insulted I was. And now I look back and think, she had it right on. We were.” Dr. Barker made it her challenge to improve the program and help it to grow. From 100 part-time students in the late 1980s, now SHU offers two undergraduate programs, a First Professional Degree program and an RN to BSN program; five graduate tracks, including Doctor of Nurse Practice; and two certificates. Eight of the programs are conducted through online classes. The RN-to-BSN online program, which is designed for students returning to college to finish their baccalaureate education, was immediately successful upon implementation, she said. The master’s track has about 300 students from 35 different states enrolled, she said, and some of those online classes are led by newly hired faculty members across the country, she said. Hundreds more students are enrolled in the other programs, including more than 40 in the doctoral track.

“I am very proud of where we are,” she said, “and we have a remarkable faculty of talented women. We work together as a team. I never dreamed that we would be where we are today.”

Dr. Barker did not know what she wanted to do for a career. She liked medical technology and wanted a job in a hospital laboratory but only a nursing assistant position was available after her senior year in high school. From that summer experience she decided to be a nurse. Her father sat her down and told her she had to go to a university program and get a BSN not a hospital program. Looking back at all she has accomplished, she asked, with a bit of wonder, “How did he know that?”

One facet of the nursing program that Dr. Barker believes is a major focus is the humanitarian missions. And she credits faculty member Watson with being integral to the success of the medical missions, which involve SHU nursing students and educators.

The medical missions, conducted in conjunction with PRN Relief International, for which Prof. Watson serves on the board, are rapidly becoming the primary caregivers for many in third world countries. 37 people, including ten undergraduate students, four nurse practitioners and three faculty members from SHU, will be heading to Kingston, Jamaica, on October 8. This particular mission will involve treating 300 adolescents and their children, all of whom are under the age of 18, who have been removed from their homes by the court system, she said. The group also will
be educating the young parents on how to care for their children. This year, PRN will be conducting a research project into the effectiveness of medical missions, said Prof. Watson, who has been on 16 trips, including to Liberia, Sri Lanka, Guatemala and Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina. Additionally, the SHU team will travel to another area in Jamaica where there are no health care resources.

The medical missionaries have observed improved care over the years as well as individuals’ better maintenance of their health. Prof. Watson said there is a continuum of care because PRN has been going to Jamaica for years. “We have noticed just from going all these years and observed of the people we have serviced that they have better maintenance of their health. Their blood pressure is more controlled; their blood sugar is more controlled. So we have seen the impact of having this service.” On this trip alone, 900 patients will be seen and 80 surgeries performed in eight days.

The medical missions began four years ago when Prof. Watson began her job at SHU. “Because I was working with the charity for so long, I wanted to share the passion that we have and the passion that I have of caring for clients in different settings. The clients we see in other countries are so appreciative of our care. And it also shows the students that health care doesn’t have to be so difficult. Small intervention can make a great impact.”

The missions, she said, are good clinical practice sites for the SHU students, who often handle the “pharmacy,” which is stocked with donated medications. “They really understand how to teach a patient. What the students get out of it is the teaching. The best way to learn is to teach,” she said. Up to 150 prescriptions a day are filled at the clinics, she said. “The students would never be able to obtain that kind of level of on-site learning up here.”

As for future trips, she said, the nursing department has to determine the best focus for the students. “I love doing clinical practice with them, and I think this is a different type of clinical. This is not high-tech, it’s high touch. You can’t dismiss what they get out of it.”

Dr. Julie Stewart, assistant professor and coordinator of the Family Nurse Practitioner Program, and Eileen Yost, M.S.N., R.N.-C, a clinical assistant professor, summed up Prof. Watson’s value in their nomination letter to CNA. “Shery provides a fitting example to both her students and the Sacred Heart University community as to what the total nursing professional should strive to be; professional, caring and compassionate, always giving and providing the utmost of nursing care with the underlying foundation of making the world that much better. Shery has demonstrated to her students that nursing is not a job, it’s a way of life in which one’s passion to care and give back can be met in the eyes of a sick patient in a remote third world country or in the eyes of a nursing student eager to put his or her mark on the world in some small way such as Shery has been able to do.”

Prof. Watson received a MSN from Quinnipiac University and a BSN from Fairfield University. She also is nationally certified in emergency nursing and is a sexual assault nurse examiner. Prior to joining the faculty at Sacred Heart, she was an adjunct instructor at Fairfield University, as well as the emergency department nurse manager and unit educator at Bridgeport Hospital.
At the hospital, she developed a new program, which was derived from her master’s degree studies, for sexual assault victims. The victims, she said, need special attention when entering the health care system. “When they do, they almost have to relive the assault, and it can be traumatizing if they are not treated correctly when they enter the health care system,” she said. They are assigned a nurse examiner, who is on call and who employs a one-to-one holistic approach. The nurse helps the patient through the process and acts as an advocate. “At the end, you feel that you made a connection with your patient because they begin to trust you, and that is the essence of nursing - being a patient advocate, and what the patient needs above everything else is an advocate who really understands them,” she said.

A native of Connecticut, Prof. Watson always wanted to be a nurse. She didn’t imagine herself being a full-time nursing instructor, but when she was the unit educator at the hospital, she realized that she enjoyed teaching the students and encouraging them.

She is pursuing her doctorate through online courses and is targeted to complete her studies in four years. She decided to seek a Ph.D. because of her global humanitarian pursuits. She wants to work toward international grant writing and research. “I love taking care of patients in third world countries.”

But she admits that she does not see her work with PRN, often under extreme conditions, “as work.” “There’s part of me that is not a hundred percent altruistic. I love doing it. It makes me happy, that’s why I am doing it. I get something out of it too. That’s my gift to myself.”