

Joanne Robinson, William Paterson University School of Nursing, Class of 1975



Joanne Robinson, founding dean of the Rutgers School of Nursing – Camden, always knew she wanted to be a nurse since she was a young girl growing up in Totowa, New Jersey. A profession as an administrator in a nursing school, however, was the last thing she thought about doing.

“When I was a college student and young nurse, I had no idea what a ‘dean’ did. As I got older I thought of myself as a teacher and researcher, but never a dean,” said the William Paterson University (WPU) School of Nursing graduate, class of 1975. Traveling from where she thought she was headed to where she has landed has been a “wild” but “exhilarating” ride.

Her exposure to the nursing profession came from her aunt, who taught at St. Joseph’s (Regional Medical Center) School of Nursing, where her mother worked as a secretary. “I was mesmerized by the stories my Aunt Jane (Patterson) and my mother told me. Nurses were brave, smart, caring, compassionate, dedicated, superwomen who saved lives. I could think of no better profession.”

“I read the Cherry Ames books (mysteries in the tradition of Nancy Drew that featured Cherry Ames student nurse as the heroine) that also fed my passion and determination to be a nurse,” said Joanne. Cherry, whose early adventures are set during World War II, demonstrates that women can succeed in the public, working world.

Aunt Jane’s work ethic made a lasting imprint on Joanne’s professional success. “She instilled in me that only the best was acceptable. She was revered and feared by the students ... a drill sergeant and perfectionist,” who demanded that beds be made with “hospital corners” and so tight that a quarter could bounce off the sheets.

The WPU School of Nursing also was the beneficiary of the wisdom of Aunt Jane Patterson, who insisted that Joanne enroll at WPU rather than attend a nursing program affiliated with a hospital. She knew the value of getting a four-year bachelor’s degree.

“It was great career advice. WPU faculty and program were tough and rigorous, but never intimidating or off-putting. I felt the same compassion and insistence on excellence in both academics and clinical practice that I had heard about from my Aunt Jane and my mother,” said Joanne.

Her “wild-ride” journey took her through positions in clinical practice (in critical care, home care, hospice, and nursing homes; leadership experience in homecare and nursing homes; and academic training that led to her getting an MS in Community Health Nursing from Rutgers, MA from the University of Pennsylvania in Social Gerontology and PhD from the University of Pennsylvania in Nursing. Ultimately, it was her adopted baby son about a decade ago that presented a right-time, right-place opportunity for working at Rutgers-Camden.

She became chair of the Rutgers-Camden Department of Nursing and transitioned the nursing program from an upper-division major to a comprehensive, four-year undergraduate program, closely aligned with the expectations of students and employers. During her tenure as chairperson, Joanne, a noted scholar on nursing care for the elderly, was named as a fellow in the American Academy of Nursing, one of the highest honors that can be bestowed in that field.

In 2011, Joanne was appointed first as interim dean then shortly afterwards dean of the new Rutgers School of Nursing – Camden which now enrolls 900, a stark comparison to the 90 enrollees when Joanne first started working at Rutgers-Camden. In 2011, the nursing school became the newest academic unit at Rutgers-Camden, providing health care institutions throughout the region with high-caliber nursing professionals. It became the fourth designated school on the Rutgers-Camden campus in 2011, but its tradition of providing affordable and high quality nursing education extends over 35 years. (Note: the new Rutgers School of Nursing, which is the product of merging the Newark-based legacy Rutgers College of Nursing and Newark-based legacy UMDNJ School of Nursing, is a separate academic entity from the Rutgers School of Nursing – Camden.)

Joanne's administrative style is rooted in what she learned from Aunt Jane and WPU. She demands excellence infused with compassion. She brings to the recipe, however, an additional Joanne ingredient – collaboration. She has been proactive in establishing affiliations with top hospitals and healthcare agencies that provide challenging clinical experiences for her students.

“Partnerships are crucial – both with clinical institutions and academic institutions (two-year and four-year nursing programs). Referring to an academic partnership that her associate dean established with Semmelweis University, the oldest medical school in Budapest, Hungary, she said “if we can do it in Budapest, why can't we do it in New Jersey?”