Through education and shared experiences, lifelong nurse helps young nurses get started on their path.

Through countless twists and turns in her life, there was always one constant for Sandra Cadena—nursing. Today, assistant dean of undergraduate studies and director of global health in the College of Nursing, Cadena believes she was born knowing she wanted to be a nurse. “I hit it lucky,” she says, “nursing picked me.”

Cadena joined the College of Nursing faculty full-time in 2000 after more than 15 years as an adjunct professor. She earned her nursing degree from Kent State University in 1976, and accepted her first RN job at a rehabilitation county hospital in inner city Cleveland. After spending three days snowed-in at the hospital that winter, she packed her bags and moved to Clearwater Beach.

In the years that ensued, Cadena worked in local hospitals, community health clinics and the VA hospital in Tampa, and spent 15 years in private practice. She earned a master’s degree in psychiatric nursing and a doctorate in nursing science with a minor in political science, all the while remaining active in the clinical setting. In 2006, she closed her private practice for good.

“As a nurse, it is a privilege to be a part of people’s intimate lives, to improve their quality of life and sometimes cure them,” she says. “In education, I found that if I influence students, I can impact and help so many more people.”

Today, in addition to her teaching and administrative responsibilities, Cadena is president of the Delta Beta chapter of Sigma Theta Tau International Society of Nursing and the College of Nursing Faculty advisor for the International Health Service Collaborative at USF.

In 2005, she was part of a USF Health advisory group that traveled to Panama to explore opportunities for student field experiences in that country. That led to the creation of the College of Nursing Study Abroad Program in Panama, a program so popular that interested participants are chosen by lottery.

“It’s one thing to deal with culturally diverse patients and students in one’s own comfort zone. But when you pick these students up, move them, and immerse them in a different culture, it really challenges who they are and how they think about things,” says Cadena, who has led two student groups on the three-week summer program. “We need to work out a way for everyone to have this experience.”

No doubt, she will.

USF: What is the most important thing you try to teach your students?

Cadena: Two things—one, to really embrace the values of what it means to be a professional nurse, one of the most highly trusted professions in this country today; and two, to learn how to listen to what patients are telling you.

USF: Why isn’t the focus on global health so important today?

Cadena: We truly are a global community. There is an expectation and a desire on the part of our students to reach out and to understand other people from other parts of this world. It is important that we position our students to positively contribute to various aspects of global health.

USF: What is the biggest difference between nursing in the U.S. and in other countries?

Cadena: Nursing in the U.S. is very focused on interventions with diseases and disease processes. In other countries, particularly where much of health care is 30 years behind, the focus is on community and prevention activities.

Cadena: I’ve done it all—intensive care nursing, home health, rehabilitation, medical/surgical. To me, psychiatric nursing was attractive because it is the one area of expertise where the one main intervention you have is yourself.

USF: What is the greatest change in nursing you have witnessed over the years?

Cadena: The cultural and linguistic diversity of the patients, nursing professionals and the students we work with. It is amazing and really evident in this community. There are both opportunities and challenges that come with it.

USF: What is the most exciting thing happening in nursing education today?

Cadena: The blending of high technology with the intense desire of students to be helpful. Combining the two is really exciting because they can be such polar opposites.

USF: Why psychiatric nursing?

Cadena: Establishing an international center for nursing at USF. In fact, I’m on my way to Ecuador tomorrow to get started on that.

– Ann Carney

Quick Takes

Classroom or Clinic: Classroom
Best Medicine: Compassion
Favorite Place: The Sea
Hands-on or High Tech: Hands-On!
Burgers or Empanadas: Empanadas
Home or Abroad: Abroad
Hero: Colombian President Alvaro Uribe

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Sandra Cadena

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