Each year, a national search is held to find the most exceptional nurses in the U.S. Nurses from across the country are nominated by colleagues. This year, Nurse.com continues its tradition of recognizing and celebrating the achievements of these dedicated nurses at regional awards galas held throughout the United States, the culmination of which results in the naming of six special nurses as 2013 Nursing Excellence GEM awardees. In each region, five remarkable nurses in six specialized categories were chosen as finalists from the hundreds of nominations received. Six overall regional winners were selected from this group.

“Our program has a sparkly new look and a shiny new name,” said Donna Novak, RN, DNP, CRNP, Nurse.com’s director and nurse executive. “The GEM Awards are our way of publicly recognizing excellence in nursing by awarding nurses who were nominated, selected and celebrated by other nurses, and who represent the best of the best in our profession. It is our privilege to honor them.”

**HOW ARE WINNERS CHOSEN?**

1. **NOMINATE**
   Nurses submit nominations of nurses and their professional roles and contributions, including examples that demonstrate the nominees’ excellence in one of six categories.

2. **SELECT**
   Finalist nominations are blinded and sent to a panel of judges comprised of nurse leaders. Each winner is determined by the ratings of those blinded nominations.

3. **HONOR**
   The six regional winners are celebrated at the GEM Awards and will move on to the national phase of the Nurse.com Nursing Excellence Awards Program.

4. **NATIONAL NURSE OF THE YEAR**
   In the latter part of the year, Nurse.com will honor a national Nurse of the Year in each of the six categories. Who will they be? Read about the Nurse of the Year winners at Nurse.com/NursingExcellence
NURSING EXCELLENCE AWARDS

2013 Mountain West winners

Mary Blessing
Ava Williams-Cornelius
Andrea Warwick
Jessica Morris
Elizabeth M. Maish
Betty A. Venth

2013 Mountain West Nursing Excellence Program

NOMINATED by nurses • SELECTED by nurses • HONORED by nurses
NURSING EXCELLENCE AWARDS

ADVANCING AND LEADING THE PROFESSION

Elizabeth M. Maish
RN, MSN, CPHQ, EDAC
Vice president and CNO,
Tucson (Ariz.) Medical Center

“You hear the first few letters of the sound of your name and it’s so unbelievable,” said Maish about being named the winner in the advancing and leading the profession category. At the awards dinner, she was seated with her husband, her director and entire nursing team when she learned she had won. “It’s an incredible honor,” Maish said.

Those who work with Maish say she’s passionate and proactive in developing leadership abilities in others. To move nursing forward, she said it’s imperative “to build in very expert leadership foundationally, right at the bedside, right in the huddles at the beginning of the shift, so nurses fully accept accountability for their work and develop competence in the sciences, compassion and empathy domains.”

Maish intentionally fosters these foundational strengths along with assertiveness and the sheer will to move things onward. Building confidence in her staff is important to Maish. “It’s as simple as giving praise when someone has done a good job,” she said.

“It doesn’t have to be over-the-moon exceptional. Getting positive, as well as constructive feedback, having the assurance that you’ll get that feedback, gives you more self confidence, more assertiveness. It makes you able to hold your head up and throw your shoulders back.”

Having had a father who was a human resources executive made her aware of her natural propensity to try to manage and organize things. “I wanted to understand why problems occur and get to the bottom of things,” Maish said. “This thrills me, it gives me satisfaction.”

Her COO at Tucson Medical Center also inspires her to be more strategic. “I’ve learned how to be a lot more strategic and not so black and white,” Maish said.

“She reiterates the significance of building leadership at the ground level. “This is very important for nursing; for many years we’ve had perceptions about what a nurse is and what they should be doing. I would challenge this thinking. We have to define what we do. I believe this begins to move us forward — getting nurses to think of what we do and take hold of our own practice.”

CLINICAL NURSING, INPATIENT

Jessica Morris
RN, BSN, CWOCN
Staff nurse,
Mayo Clinic Hospital,
Phoenix

As a staff nurse and relief-team leader on a 36-bed post-op floor, Morris said she cares for patients with complicated needs. Often the colorectal patients return from surgery with ostomies. She often felt she wasn’t able to provide all the nursing care she wanted to because she was without formal training in ostomy care.

“I felt like I would benefit from more education and from getting a certification to help me in taking care of those complicated cases,” she said.

“Being in a team lead position as I am, it’s also a help [to have ostomy and wound care training] to be a resource to the staff,” Morris said. After caring for ostomy patients for a couple of years, Morris chose to pursue ostomy and wound care training, culminating in receiving her certification about 18 months ago.

“I love being a bedside nurse,” she said, “and feeling like I’ve made a difference every day. I enjoy taking care of patients.”

Her inspiration to enter the profession came when she lost her father to cancer. “My dad was ill a long time, and I had a lot of exposure to nurses, so that influence led me to want to make a difference in people’s lives.”

In addition to bedside care, Morris has been a med/surg clinical instructor for Arizona State University BSN students for four years, with clinical oversight of up to 10 students each day.

“I’m at a good hospital that’s given me a lot of opportunities, such as with ostomy care and with teaching as a clinical instructor,” she said. “I think I’ve become a jack-of-all-trades in nursing and my work has given me a lot of opportunities to work in different roles.”

“I strongly encourage other nurses to go into teaching; it’s an excellent way to keep up your practice,” Morris said. “It’s renewed my love for nursing and for education. Nursing is always changing and new things are coming out. I also encourage nurses to pursue certification; you feel more educated at the bedside, and you’re more capable in your practice.”

While Morris is certainly a very capable nurse, she says she was still “very surprised” to hear her name called as the winner of the clinical nursing, inpatient award.
NURSING EXCELLENCE AWARDS

EDUCATION AND MENTORSHIP

Mary Blessing
RN, MSN
Area director, nursing education and research,
University of New Mexico Hospitals,
Albuquerque

Mary Blessing’s work as area director of education and research at University of New Mexico Hospital’s 450-bed academic medical center includes overseeing nursing research, inpatient and clinical education, and the nurse residency program. She has been instrumental in best practice at the bedside as she supervises nurse residents and collaborates with colleagues to ensure consistency in educational initiatives.

“For me, the nurse residency program and nursing research kind of go hand-in-hand,” said Blessing. “I’m motivated by having the ability to really make a difference and to influence new nurses, helping them hold onto the passion of nursing and seeing them be successful.” In the current residency program, Blessing has overseen 75 new graduates this year.

Blessing’s role with research led her to initiate a new program at her facility that enables some of the staff RNs to spend four hours each week on research initiatives. “We have worked on nursing research projects with nurse residents, and I felt like we needed to spread it out farther, beyond the new grads, and provide other opportunities,” she said.

“A lot of our nurses have great ideas for nursing research, but don’t have the tools to make something happen. This program is helping them develop their process improvement and evidence-based practice to make a difference in patient outcomes. I believe it has been really successful.”

She said her interest in nursing research was sparked during graduate school. It was then she realized she enjoyed discovering better ways of accomplishing nursing care goals.

“In my current position, I have learned so much from all my peers and our director of nursing,” she said. “I enjoy seeing nurses come up with fabulous ideas that positively influence patient outcomes.”

Blessing offers these words of wisdom to nurses she works with or leads: “No experience is a bad experience. Everything you do leads you to the next step. No matter where you start, you can always move another step toward your goal...Be aware that it’s important to appreciate the small steps.”

Winning the GEM Award was no small step for Blessing. “I was actually shocked,” she said of hearing her name called as the winner of the education and mentorship category. “I didn’t expect to win.”

HOME, COMMUNITY AND AMBULATORY CARE

Ava Williams-Cornelius
RN
Avondale (Ariz.) School District and Chamberlain College Preceptor Program

On the night of the awards dinner, Ava Williams-Cornelius was at the Chamberlain College table with her nominator and a former principal from her workplace “having a great time, with no clue I would win.” When she was named the winner for the category of home, community and ambulatory care, “it was very exciting,” she said.

Even after 31 years, Williams-Cornelius is passionate about her work as a school nurse with the Avondale School District and she feels she’s still in the right place. “After that long, you know your niche,” she said. “I don’t have any children of my own, so to be able to work with children in the community is so rewarding.”

She decided to become a school nurse after reading a newspaper ad and sensing she needed a change from her job in a trauma center. Her enduring pleasure in working with school children and families is heightened by her role as a district preceptor for nursing students from Chamberlain College. “I’m called ‘the teaching nurse’ because I love to teach nurses,” she explained. “I’m motivated to demonstrate to nursing students “the real side of what school nurses do.”

The “real side” includes involvement in programs throughout the community and providing programs for the families of children under her care. Many families of the 1,050 children she serves are low income. Her outreach efforts have included coordinating a grant that enabled parents and students to take part in classes that improve their understanding of state standardized testing. Williams-Cornelius also involves students in a fluoride program for improved dental health and facilitates English classes and clothing and food assistance programs, all activities that she believes help her nursing students grasp community health nursing.

Williams-Cornelius said the importance of her role as a school nurse was confirmed years ago. “I had a wonderful administrator and close friend in a principal who first called me ‘the teaching nurse,’” Williams-Cornelius said. “She inspired me and gave me many opportunities as an RN and a certified employee. I was inspired by her encouragement and faith in me.”

She advises nursing colleagues in community health roles to attend community meetings and then share what they learn with other nurses.
NURSING EXCELLENCE AWARDS

PATIENT AND STAFF MANAGEMENT

Betty A. Venth
RN, MSN, BSN, BC

After serving in the military for 17 years, Betty A. Venth considers her objectivity one of her greatest strengths in patient and staff management. Nevertheless, she was taken by surprise at the GEM awards banquet when she was named the winner for this category.

Venth has held six nursing positions during her military career with all of them honing her nursing and management skills. “Each of these opportunities has given me numerous experiences to build upon in shaping my leadership skills and managing my staff and patient population while focusing on quality outcomes,” she said.

She employs a diverse skill set in management, patient care and professional duties as a flight commander, overseeing 71 staff including physicians, mid-level providers, nurses and technicians in a bustling family health clinic.

“I really love looking at processes and procedures and finding a way to make things more efficient with quality patient outcomes,” she said. She completed two process-improvement studies for the clinics, resulting in team continuity and a surge in patient satisfaction. She also developed a management tool that tracks providers’ weekly appointments, ensuring that appointment standards and provider availability meet patient demand.

Venth is preparing with her staff for a consolidated unit inspection — focusing on meeting the military inspection criteria involving components such as follow-up on abnormal lab results and training requirements. She said her ability to succeed as a nurse manager is a result of “looking at the big picture at what’s going on, hold my staff accountable and try to empower them to look at issues and find ways to make things better.”

She noted that her initial inspiration for a nursing career stemmed from the many nursing roles available. “I’ve always enjoyed learning new roles and trying to understand all the dynamics of a healthcare organization,” Venth said.

Venth advises nurses who are looking toward management positions to follow their organization’s policies and procedures to get things done.

VOLUNTEERISM AND SERVICE

Andrea Warwick
RN, MSN/ED, PCCN
RN clinical education specialist, Banner Good Samaritan Medical Center, Phoenix

A few days after receiving the award for volunteerism and service, Andrea Warwick flew to the East Coast for a week of Federal Emergency Management Agency training to augment her skills as a volunteer member of the Disaster Medical Assistance Team. The training didn’t eclipse the surprise and excitement she felt upon learning of the award.

Warwick said she’s very fortunate her employer, Banner Good Samaritan Medical Center, and her colleagues support her volunteer disaster work, carrying the additional load when she’s deployed.

Her inspiration for this substantial involvement is her sheer love of the work. “I love teaching nurses at my job as a clinical education specialist, and I love being able to help people when they really are in need,” Warwick said.

On the DMAT, team members “get to step in and help with a medical event, or just show support — like hold a hand or share a smile — with people who are experiencing the worst things in their lives.”

Warwick said she was motivated to become involved in disaster relief after taking a class about five years ago at the FEMA training. “I’ve been hooked ever since,” Warwick said. “I was always interested in disaster nursing and unsure of how to get involved. Working in the community, knowing that you stepped into someone’s life when they were in need and were able to interact and make a difference makes everything we do worthwhile.”

She sees her volunteer service as a way to inspire other nurses to become involved. “I have a great deal of passion when I talk about DMAT, and many nurses are excited to hear the stories and learn about how we manage patients in a disaster zone,” Warwick said. “Frequently I’m asked how to join [the team].”

She advises nurses considering sharing their time and skills as community volunteers to start by researching the type of volunteer work that’s available. Warwick suggests checking out the Red Cross or the National Disaster Medical System. DMATs are a branch of the NDMS and all credentialing is done through them. In Arizona there is also a credentialing registry called ESAR-VHP (Emergency System for Advance Registration of Volunteer Health Professionals).