Nurse.com prides itself in recognizing the accomplishments of nurses of excellence at its GEM (Giving Excellence Meaning) award programs. Held in various cities throughout the United States, these celebrations honor exceptional nurses from all specialties and practice settings, and each culminates in the naming of six regional winners in six different categories. The regional winners move on to compete in the GEM national nurse of the year program. “Our nursing excellence GEM Awards program shines brightly once again as we salute our 2014 regional winners,” said Eileen Williamson, RN, MSN, senior vice president and chief nurse executive. “Nominated and selected by their colleagues, they truly epitomize nursing at its best. We are honored to present them with our prestigious GEM awards and privileged to recognize them publicly for their many contributions to nursing and healthcare.” This year’s regional GEM program was held at the Chicago Marriott Schaumburg on May 9.

Nurse.com is pleased to introduce you to the 2014 Nurse.com GEM regional award winners.

MEET THE REGIONAL WINNERS

Winner profiles by Jonathan Bilyk • Photos by Mike Milinac

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.

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For more on the GEM Awards program, visit Nurse.com/Nursing-Excellence.
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ADVANCING & LEADING THE PROFESSION

Mary Ann McDermott, RN, EdD, FAAN
Professor emerita, Marcella Niehoff School of Nursing and nurse educator, Loyola University and Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital, Chicago

For more than a half century, McDermott has applied her exceptional skills and extensive experience to caring for patients. But throughout that time, McDermott also has lent her voice to the profession, serving as an advocate for nurses and teaching them what they need to know to become leaders in healthcare.

For that lifetime of service, education and advocacy, McDermott was honored with the 2014 Nursing Excellence GEM Award in the category of Advancing and Leading the Profession. McDermott said the GEM Award represents “a great capstone to my career.”

In her long and distinguished nursing career, McDermott said she found the happiness that has sustained her through a 30-year career as a professor at Loyola University Chicago and has carried her to some of the highest levels of healthcare governance.

“I’ve had many leadership opportunities within and outside of the profession,” she said.

McDermott was credited with playing an instrumental role in establishing a Marcella Niehoff School of Nursing-run community health clinic at Loyola. Building on her career, she moved up the ranks of the organization that would come to be known as Advocate Health Care, eventually serving as chairwoman of Advocate’s board of directors.

In the years since, McDermott has authored three books on community faith nursing, has become an recognized national and international speaker, and works as a consultant to help procure grants for such organizations as the Driehaus Foundation and the Kellogg Foundation, among others.

She was the founding leader of the Health Ministries Association, now known as the Church Health Organization, and was the founding president of the Nurses and Humanities Group affiliated with Hektoen Institute of Medicine in Chicago.

For the last five years, she has served as a part-time nursing educator with the nurse residency program at Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital, and still serves as a nurse liaison with the Niehoff School of Nursing at Loyola.

“There is a beautiful quote from Frederick Buechner that I will paraphrase: ‘Calling is where your deep gladness meets the world’s great hunger.’ I am so fortunate to combine nursing and teaching. It’s where I find my deep gladness.”

Mary Ann McDermott, RN

CLINICAL NURSING, INPATIENT

Stephanie Seburn, RN, BSN, CCRN
Education coordinator, general medicine, Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Chicago

For her years of caring work as a clinical nurse and her more recent contributions to leadership at both her home hospital and the nursing profession overall, Seburn was honored as the recipient of the 2014 Nursing Excellence GEM award in the category of Inpatient Clinical Nursing. “To receive that validation, from people outside our organization, thinking that my accomplishments are worthy of recognition, it feels really good,” she said.

Seburn began her nursing career about 13 years ago after her family struggled through twin tragedies when her brother died and her sister was badly injured in an automobile accident, requiring six weeks of hospitalization.

After her brother’s death and seeing the care her sister received, Seburn said she reevaluated her life goals and gave up a marketing career to become a nurse.

Through her first 12 years in nursing, Seburn worked in clinical care at Northwestern Memorial. She became clinical coordinator of Northwestern’s coronary care unit, in which she would regularly work with some of medicine’s most critically ill patients — those needing heart transplants.

“I still have heart transplant patients who write me letters,” she said. “It makes you feel so grateful to have been a part of that.”

A little more than a year ago, Seburn stepped into leadership, taking on the role of education coordinator, working with more than 300 nurses and patient care technicians to help shape their professional development through the facility’s various programs. Seburn said she was particularly proud of helping develop the hospital’s shared leadership program, which gives bedside nurses greater involvement in determining how patient care is delivered.

For her work on that program, she was selected to address the 2013 American Nurses Credentialing Center’s Magnet Conference.

While she is valued at the hospital for her work in educating, training and mentoring nurses, Seburn’s clinical work remains an important part of her career. She continues to take one shift each week in the medical ICU to keep her critical care, and I get to teach nurses what is really important about being a nurse and an advocate for our patients.”

Stephanie Seburn, RN

For more on the GEM Awards program,
EDUCATION & MENTORSHIP

Lynn Watson, RN, MSN, CMRSN  
Director of professional nursing practice and development, Presence Saint Joseph Medical Center, Joliet, Ill.

Before Watson took the reins of the mentoring program at Presence Saint Joseph Medical Center, turnover of new nurses was a common occurrence. Since Watson began guiding the program, nurse retention has improved dramatically. The hospital’s Transition into Practice program has been credited with playing a large role in boosting retention of newly graduated nurses, with fewer than one in 10 leaving in a typical year.

“We normally take on three cohorts of new nurses a year,” Watson said. “And in the last four cohorts, we have had 100% retention. It’s been amazing to see.”

Watson’s supervisors at Presence St. Joseph give her much of the credit for the remarkable change, and because of her efforts, she was presented with the 2014 Nursing Excellence GEM Award in the Education and Mentorship category.

“It’s kind of overwhelming, because I’m so honored to be even considered among these other nursing leaders. Every one of them is so accomplished and has done so much for the profession,” she said after receiving the award.

Watson knew from an early age she wanted to be a nurse. As a child with severe asthma, Watson greatly admired the nurses who cared for her at the pulmonologist’s office and desired to help people like they helped her.

But after working for a few years in nursing, Watson, who came from a long line of educators, felt the tug of the classroom as well. In 2001, she launched a new career, combining both desires into a new career as a nurse educator.

“I love seeing light bulbs, helping people find those ‘Ah ha!’ moments,” Watson said. “And I love helping other nurses develop themselves professionally.”

That work has developed into such initiatives as the Transition into Practice program for new nurses, and the development of the nurse educators she supervises who provide clinical education and professional development to the nearly 850 nurses at Presence St. Joseph Medical Center.

Watson also has focused on improving patient outcomes with the Let’s Get Moving staff education campaign encouraging greater emphasis on patient mobility and reducing accidental injuries from falls with the ARC (Awareness, Responsibility and Commitment) Angel Program.

“Lynn is innovative and encourages others to passionately drive improvements,” her nominator wrote.

HOME, COMMUNITY & AMBULATORY CARE

Jennifer Wright, RN, BSN, CNN  
Transplant nurse coordinator, Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Chicago

As transplant nurse coordinator at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago, Wright regularly delivers potentially life-saving news to patients.

“For anyone in need of a new kidney or pancreas, I’m the one who gets to make the call, to let them know we have an organ for them, or we’ve found one,” Wright said. “And to hear the gratitude, the thankfulness, and emotion, it’s so great to be a part of it.”

Wright, whose co-workers have called her “a professional healthcare superhero,” was bestowed the 2014 Nursing Excellence GEM Award in the category of Home, Community and Ambulatory Care. “It was very humbling,” she said. “I looked around the room at all the nominees and heard their incredible stories. At this point in my career, to even be nominated is a huge honor.”

Wright did not always want to be a nurse, but dedicated her education and career to nursing after a summer abroad in Ghana opened her eyes to the critical healthcare needs of patients and their families.

In the six years since entering the nursing profession, Wright has devoted her career to serving those in need of organ transplants. For the last year and a half, she has served in her current role within one of the largest volume organ transplant centers in the country, coordinating the evaluations of nearly 30 new patients weekly and maintaining a list of more than 1,500 patients awaiting a new kidney or pancreas.

But Wright said she does not get lost in numbers, instead spends time getting to know as many of her patients personally as she can.

“It’s a gift to be in people’s lives, to walk with them through this every day,” she said.

That extra effort provides Wright with some of her most memorable moments. She recently was able to help coordinate a “domino transplant” — essentially, an organ swap among multiple living donor/recipient pairs — that resulted in a patient younger than 30 years old receiving a compatible kidney when he had nearly resigned himself to a lifetime of dialysis.

“Essentially, he won the jackpot,” Wright said. “And to be able to tell him and his family, there’s nothing that compares to that.”

“I love seeing light bulbs, helping people find those ‘Ah ha!’ moments,” Watson said. “And I love helping other nurses develop themselves professionally.”

Jennifer Wright, RN

“It’s a gift to be in people’s lives, to walk with them through this every day.”
PATIENT & STAFF MANAGEMENT

Meredith Borak, RN, MSN
Patient care manager, rescue care and resiliency,
The University of Chicago Medicine

Unlike some nurses, Borak didn’t always know she wanted to be a nurse. In fact, when Borak first entered college, she did so with the intent to study mortuary science.

But ever since her husband suggested Borak, a former Army medic, might be better at saving lives, she has never looked back and has pursued nursing with a passion infectious to all those around her. For raising the bar for rapid resuscitation programs at her facility and providing a model program other healthcare organizations may wish to emulate, Borak was selected to receive the 2014 Nursing Excellence GEM Award for Patient and Staff Management.

Borak entered the nursing profession 11 years ago and truly enjoys working with patients. For the last four years, she has worked at the University of Chicago Medicine. Since July 2011, she has been the hospital’s patient care manager of rescue and resiliency.

Borak has taken a leading role in reforming the way the hospital’s rescue and resuscitation teams operate, and in the way the hospital’s nurses respond in emergencies requiring RRT response.

“When a patient would code, nurses often weren’t acting first,” she said. “It was very rare for a nurse to grab a defibrillator and get going, without waiting around for direction or for an RRT to arrive.”

In the 18 months after the new RRT plan went into place, the number of instances in which patients received immediate defibrillator response from nurses increased sharply, as have the rates of patient survival.

Borak has been credited with establishing new teams of nurses who make daily “proactive rounds” for high-risk patients, looking for subtle signs of distress their regular nurses might miss. Borak said such programs have decreased transfers to intensive care, keeping patients alive and healthier, improving lengths of stay and saving the hospital money.

Borak has been invited to present at nursing conferences and has been published as the lead author in the Journal of Nursing Care Quality.

She hopes her work and her selection as a GEM Award winner will inspire nurses at the University of Chicago and elsewhere.

“It will mean all the hard work paid off,” she said. “It would show this model actually works.”

Trisha Kupczyk, RN

Registered nurse, Advocate Christ Medical Center, Oak Lawn, Ill.

Even though she was outside in the elements for most of the day, Kupczyk never saw the storms that tore through northern and central Illinois on Nov. 17, 2013.

But after returning home from the Chicago Bears football game at Soldier Field that day, Kupczyk saw the fallout from the storms that spawned the killer tornadoes that heavily damaged Coal City in Chicago’s south suburbs and the town of Washington in central Illinois. The scenes stirred Kupczyk to act, organizing a relief effort for the towns in general, and particularly assisting one family who had lost their home in the storm.

For those efforts, Kupczyk was honored as the 2014 Nursing Excellence GEM Award for Volunteerism and Service. “I was truly shocked that I was nominated, became a finalist and won. A lot of people said it was an inspiring story, so if people can be inspired through this, then I’m happy,” Kupczyk had known from an early age that nursing was her calling. She was impressed by the compassion nurses demonstrated for their patients, including her grandmother, who was stricken with cancer.

In her 20 years in the profession, Kupczyk has demonstrated that compassion in caring for patients, having spent the last 15 years in the cardiac care unit at Advocate Christ Medical Center in Oak Lawn.

The compassion reached new heights when she drove her first carload of relief supplies to tornado-stricken communities such as Washington. After seeing the state of the towns and their people, she used vacation time to take the next month off work and dedicated herself to helping the communities.

She continued to solicit donations of clothing, blankets and other supplies from her friends and neighbors, primarily via social media.

But Kupczyk went further still, answering the call to “adopt” a Washington family she had never met through a database maintained by the United Methodist Church. In addition to collecting supplies and resources to help the family, Kupczyk used her own funds to purchase shoes, coats, backpacks for school, new clothing and even gifts for the family’s four children for Christmas.

In the months since, Kupczyk has been invited by several groups to share her story, and she has agreed — but only to inspire others to action, she said.

“This is just what I know,” she said. “If someone needs help, you’re there for them.”