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 from the hundreds of nominations received.

“Our program has a sparkly new look and a shiny new name,” said Eileen Williamson, RN, MSN, Nurse.com senior vice president and chief 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
2013 New England winners

NURSING EXCELLENCE AWARDS

Marie B. McCarthy
Linda Zabbo
Julie Cronin
Ellie Bergeron
Edward Burch
Patricia P. Donlan

Advancing and Leading the Profession
Clinical Nursing, Inpatient
Education and Mentorship
Home, Community and Ambulatory Care
Patient and Staff Management
Volunteerism and Service

Read about the winners at Nurse.com/Gallery/NE-GEM-Awards.
ADVANCING AND LEADING THE PROFESSION

Marie B. McCarthy
RN, MS
Vice President for Education
Lawrence Memorial/Regis College Nursing Program
and Hallmark Health System
Medford, Mass.

“I am honored to be receiving this Nurse.com award for doing something that I still love after more than 45 years in the profession, and that is truly amazing,” said McCarthy, after receiving an enthusiastic round of applause from the 300 guests at the GEM Award program in Newton, Mass. McCarthy’s colleagues describe her as a visionary leader. Under her direction, the program twice was awarded the National League for Nursing’s prestigious Center of Excellence designation — an honor bestowed on fewer than 10% of schools — and she is spearheading the program’s move to BSN accreditation. Admired for her determined spirit, McCarthy has served as Hallmark’s interim CNO on three occasions. She has helped create Dedicated Education Units, tuition reimbursement and academic bridge programs, a new manager mentorship program and a professional development center at Hallmark. McCarthy said choosing nursing was one of the best decisions she has made in life and expressed gratitude to her family and the many professionals who have been exemplary role models in her career.

“They have helped me to learn about the meaning of authentic leadership, and every day I learn new ways of doing the right thing for the right reason,” McCarthy said. Never one to shy away from challenges, she was selected as an international consultant and led in the establishment of the Gouna Nursing Institute, Egypt’s first degree/licensure program. As a member of the Massachusetts Board of Registration, she contributes her expertise on licensure program. As a member of the Massachusetts Board of Registration, she contributes her expertise on accreditation issues for the Department of Higher Education, and the NLN Accrediting Commission.

“I am very fortunate to have had so many wonderful opportunities at the local, state, national and international levels during my career,” McCarthy said. “Being recognized is very humbling and affirming of the work I have done and we all do every day in nursing and nursing education.” McCarthy said she still has some “unfinished business,” which includes influencing the statewide articulation model in nursing education; assisting in the completion of the associate degree nursing program’s transition to a baccalaureate program; and continuing to do international work in nursing education.

“I am proud to be a nurse, as it influences every aspect of my life and the lives of all those whom nursing touches, whether it be in patient care, education or administration and leadership,” she said.

CLINICAL NURSING, INPATIENT

Julie Cronin
RN, MSN, OCN
Clinical Nurse Specialist
Massachusetts General Hospital
Boston

“This is such an honor, and I am so surprised,” Cronin said after receiving enthusiastic congratulations and hugs from her colleagues and family and accepting the GEM Award from Eileen Williamson, RN, MSN, senior vice president and CNE, Nurse.com. Cronin thanked MGH administration and her family for their constant support and her colleagues for inspiring her to be a better nurse.

“Nursing is driven by compassion, skill and devotion, and I am privileged to experience this each and every day with my colleagues,” said Cronin, who helped her staff implement more than 20 innovations that have enhanced patient care and safety on her gynecological oncology unit in less than a year. “They inspire me to help advance nursing practice on our unit at the individual and collective level.”

Cronin’s responsibilities include staff development, needs assessment and quality improvement initiatives. Her colleagues describe her as an invaluable resource for clinical issues, including chemotherapy, end-of-life care and wound management. In addition, Cronin serves as the liaison for unit and hospitalwide policies and procedures. As someone who is always looking for ways to make a difference, Cronin created a graduate nurse mentorship program, helped organize monthly ethics rounds, and also applied for a Schwartz Center grant to bring therapeutic support to the gynecology and oncology service.

Cronin has made measurable contributions to the unit, and has spearheaded countless initiatives benefiting patients and bringing recognition to her staff and unit. Through a two-year, facility-supported grant, Cronin’s unit participated in the Care Innovations and Transformation program, and the knowledge gained and positive outcomes achieved are being shared nationally.

“This prestigious award not only recognizes me, but also recognizes nurses from my past, present and future, as well as the patients and families who entrust us with their care,” she said. “It is an acknowledgement of the passion for, and dedication to, nursing that I share with my colleagues.”

Cronin plans to continue her work as a clinical nurse specialist in women’s health and oncology, she said, because she feels she can make a positive difference in the lives of patients and families in their times of need. She also hopes to pursue her PhD in nursing in the future.
NURSING EXCELLENCE AWARDS

EDUCATION AND MENTORSHIP

Ellie Bergeron
RN, MSN
Nursing Educator/Director, Center of Excellence
Brigham and Women’s Hospital
Boston

“From the moment you receive the letter from Nurse.com informing you that you have been nominated by your colleagues for this prestigious award, you are a winner,” Bergeron said after receiving a round of applause as she approached the stage. Bergeron thanked colleagues for nominating her and said the award is special because nurses see and acknowledge the best in their co-workers.

“To be honored for the work that I love to do each day is an incredible blessing,” said Bergeron, who is recognized by her colleagues for making unique, enduring and measurable contributions to both staff education and mentorship.

Bergeron leads the nurse educator group in the clinical education of staff and the rollout of all new nursing practice initiatives. She also serves as a mentor on evidence-based practice projects, presents at regional and national forums, serves on research committees and is responsible for highlighting staff contributions to evidence-based practice and research.

Bergeron said the award has tremendous meaning to her because it emphasizes mentorship.

“I believe that learning occurs best when it is acquired through situations and conversations shared with a trusted colleague,” she said. “Our profession is unique because our lessons are both taught and learned within the context of either our personal or our patient situations.”

Bergeron leads the nursing team in educating newly licensed, novice and experienced RNs and educators in simulation and patient education. Peers point out her ability to help nurses adapt successfully to the acute care setting and to complete required simulation activities.

Admired by peers for her excellent interpersonal and critical-thinking skills, Bergeron is said to possess laserlike focus on the education of staff, ensuring that it is made applicable to clinical skills and practice. Bergeron said she believes helping a new nurse integrate knowledge into practice requires clinical immersion, situated coaching and support from professional colleagues at all levels of the organization. In addition, she said, it requires investment of capital and human resources to provide a new nurse with the time and support required for successful transition.

“Each day, I am privileged to learn and to teach as I travel with a new graduate, a preceptor or an educator on the journey to thinking, feeling and being a nurse, no matter what the role,” Bergeron said.

HOME, COMMUNITY AND AMBULATORY CARE

Linda Zabbo
RN, BSN
Cardiac Care Remote Monitoring Coordinator
VNA of Care New England
Warwick, R.I.

“This is the most amazing experience of my professional career, and I am so grateful, so honored, so proud, and yet so humbled to receive this award,” said Zabbo, who also recognized the other nominees in her category as equally deserving recipients.

Zabbo said she always knew she belonged in a career that would allow her to provide care to those in need and those who are academically challenged.

In high school, she worked as a nursing assistant in a nursing home and would help feed, bathe and dress residents who were unable to help themselves.

“I would listen to their life stories about family, friends, politics, the economy, personal triumphs, tragedies and failing health,” Zabbo said. “Most of the time we shared smiles, but sometimes we shared tears. And, at the end of the day, I always felt a sense of pride knowing that I made a difference in someone else’s life.”

Since that time, Zabbo has continued to do just that. She is admired by colleagues for her ability to seek out every alternative, listen to others and apply her skills to develop services that will make the greatest impact.

Under her leadership, a collaborative care model aimed at improving the safety of hospital-to-home transitions was created for patients with congestive heart failure. She and her project team developed protocols and processes for the program in six key elements.

A full pilot went live for one year, during which the 30-day readmission rate for patients with heart failure decreased 40%, saving an estimated $10,000 per patient in avoidable rehospitalization costs with the program in place. As a result of her work, the cardiac care program is receiving support through a Project Change Leaders initiative to develop patient self-management skills and competencies.

Zabbo also has been recognized by her health system with its highest quality and customer satisfaction award. “Healthcare reform challenges all of us to think differently, be creative and have the courage to envision a new way of delivering affordable, quality healthcare,” Zabbo said.

She plans on continuing to facilitate and cultivate a community of people who are well-informed and engaged in managing their health, and is committed to collaborating with other healthcare providers to develop and implement specialty programs that will address the needs of high-risk cardiac patients.

“Making a difference in someone’s life is what nursing means to me, and that is why I chose the profession,” Zabbo said.
PATIENT AND STAFF MANAGEMENT

Edward Burch
RN, MS, CNRN
Professional Development Manager
Tufts Medical Center
Boston

“I am in an amazing position to be up here and receiving this prestigious award, and I want to thank my colleagues because without them, I would not be standing up here,” Burch said from the stage at the GEM Awards gala.

Upon accepting the award, Burch likened his unit to a Rubik’s Cube, because of its members’ success in consistently aligning their abilities and talents to form a collaborative, effective team.

Burch said he is grateful for what nursing has given him over the years, from his early beginnings as an orderly, his journey from an LPN and RN to a bachelor’s- and master’s-prepared nurse, and now in his role as professional development manager at Tufts.

“I think it is important to remind ourselves where we have been so we know the direction that we are heading in the future,” said Burch, who saved a thank-you card from an appreciative patient for many years and still has his first patient assignment card from when he was an orderly.

Central to Burch’s current nursing role is his passion for teaching the art, science and practice of nursing. He is admired by his colleagues for his knowledge and inquisitive mind and for seeking out innovative improvements in care.

“In an ever-changing and complex healthcare environment with compressed time frames to achieve specific patient outcomes, it is better to change to stay stagnant,” said Burch, who is described by colleagues as a transformational and fully accountable leader who is passionate about evidence-based practice and nursing research.

Burch recently earned his neurology certification enabled him to move practice forward.

Respected for his ability to lead by example and take complex concepts and cases and individualize them into teachable moments, Burch is considered an expert in hospital-acquired injury prevention.

With a warm smile and words of gratitude, Donlan accepted the Nurse.com award for her volunteer work with Medical Missions for Children.

“I am so honored to have been chosen as the recipient of the GEM Award,” Donlan said. “Its brilliance represents the thousands of beautiful children we help through Medical Missions. No child should have to live with a cleft lip [or] palate or missing ear.”

A PACU nurse with MMFC, Donlan has volunteered on nine missions over the past five years. In the most recent visit to Antigua, Guatemala, she served as lead nurse on a 24-member volunteer team.

Donlan is recognized by colleagues for her direct patient care, management and education skills and her skills as a liaison between the OR, PACU and other units.

The other missionaries describe her as being fully engaged and committed, and as someone who always has patient’s best interests at heart.

“I truly love working as a PACU nurse as part of a medical mission team, and I feel it is a calling,” Donlan said. “We all are there for one reason: to care for the children and their families.”

While explaining what the mission experiences mean to her, Donlan offered a touching example.

A young, Spanish-speaking boy who was missing an ear had worked hard during the months leading up to his surgery to learn Donlan’s name and a few English words so he could thank her.

The repair was done in stages, so Donlan had the chance to get to know him and his family over several years.

“When he did speak with me, he was so proud, and I was so proud of him for his thoughtfulness,” Donlan said. “It is moments like these that tug at your heartstrings and keep you coming back year after year.”

Donlan gathers donations for the children before the trips; works with the executive director before, during and after the mission to ensure high care standards; and mentors nurses who have joined missions for the first time.

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Donlan uses her personal vacation time and pays a fee to MMFC to participate. Peers call her joyful, generous to the core and a true example of real nursing excellence.

“This award will be a constant reminder to me of the difference we make in the lives of children and their families around the world,” Donlan said. *