Spring Commencement

May 2019 The following special graduation edition of CU Nursing showcases several members of the class while highlighting their accomplishments, unique interests and talents, and future plans. Discover commencement through the excited eyes of some of our graduates.
After working with a medical team in the secluded villages of Guatemala, Rebecca Harmon finally listened to her mother. Seeing the sick, poverty-stricken people in such dire need of health care, she made the decision to follow in her mom’s footsteps and become a nurse.

Harmon is set to cross the stage during the May 24 Spring Commencement 2019 University of Colorado College of Nursing ceremony on the Anschutz Medical Campus. And, as Harmon accepts her BSN, her mother likely will be one of the loudest fans cheering her on.

“Mom’s a nurse, and she always told me: You need to go to nursing school. You should be in the medical field,” Harmon said. “But of course, being my mom, I never listened to her.”

INTERPRETER STINT FUELS NURSING CAREER GOAL

Unsure of her direction after high school, Harmon began working with an organization that deployed medical teams to foreign countries. Having moved with her parents back to their native Mexico for the duration of her elementary school years, Harmon was fluent in Spanish.

So she completed some interpreter training and joined a trip.

“I went to Guatemala for three months and did interpreting for the doctors,” she said. “And I really fell in love with it. I loved being a provider for people who are underserved.”

When she returned, she began her education, entering CU Nursing through the Integrated Nursing Pathway program.

“It is such a well-known program, and they really focus on diversity and offering more of an opportunity for diverse students compared to other programs.”

SEX-TRAFFICKING EXPERIENCE CONFIRMS NURSING CALL

The nurturing spirit her mother must have seen came through again, when a good friend of Harmon’s fulfilled a long-time
dream of opening a girls’ home for sex-trafficking victims in Denver. Despite facing the demands of a nursing program, Harmon worked part-time in the home for girls ages 12 to 18.

“I was called a direct care provider, so I was with these girls one-on-one every single day.” The girls who qualified for the home often came directly from the sex-trafficking world and were highly traumatized and confused, Harmon said.

“It just made me so aware of everything that was happening in our backyard and in places that were literally down the street from me,” Harmon said. “It’s just amazing now that they opened the home how much more awareness there is of it and how many cases we have to turn down because there is simply not enough space,” she said. “There is a huge need.”

Many of the girls were runaways from the foster care system. “It made me just heartbroken. I realized how much healing has to take place with them,” said Harmon, who learned a lot about trauma-informed care during her time working with the home.

EXPERIENCES HELP SHAPE COMMUNITY SERVICE PLAN

“It was so helpful having that mental health side of it. Bringing that into my nursing has been super helpful,” said Harmon, who had to quit to focus on her education but intends to continue helping sex-trafficking victims again someday.

For now, her sights are set on becoming a community nurse practitioner and eventually having an even bigger impact on medically needy populations. She and her husband have talked seriously about moving overseas somewhere in critical need of medical care, Harmon said. “We would want to go where we could help even more people.”

Kathryn Mathis discovered nursing when her daughter Lily contracted viral meningitis, which then developed into a serious brain injury. “I wanted to give back. The nurses inspired me... I don’t think I would have ended up here if Lily and I didn’t have that experience.”

With five children, Mathis learned during the BSN program to balance her family and her education. “My husband is incredibly supportive and excited for me,” said Mathis. Even with support, the balance can be difficult to strike. “I had to change the way we live. Taking off the little loads make a big difference - like dishes. There were some times when we used paper plates because I didn’t have the time to do the dishes.” With advocates in her home and at the College of Nursing encouraging her along the way, she was able to thrive educationally. Mathis specifically singles out Assistant Professor Tammy Spencer. “She is by far the best instructor I’ve ever met.” Spencer reinforced Mathis’ drive to complete her education with reassuring words of encouragement throughout the program.

After graduation, Mathis will be continuing the long process to medical foster care. For her family, it is important to support children like Lily - those who do not have homes but need medical attention at home. Ultimately, Mathis would like to continue to serve the pediatric population with terminal illnesses or severe physical disabilities.

Mathis’ words of wisdom to anyone studying medical professions is to not get caught up in the textbook. She emphasizes that many patients will not fit into boxes laid out in scientific literature. Having empathy is key. “Presume competence in people with disabilities. Expect the best out of people - they are intelligent.”

Graduation 2019
GRADUATION

No one can predict who will make a great nurse, but when it comes to Chantal Dengah, the cards are in her favor.

As with any medical professional, skill and accuracy are required for nursing success, two characteristics engrained in Dengah, set to graduate from the University of Colorado College of Nursing during the May 24 Spring Commencement.

While her coursework on the Anschutz Medical Campus laid a solid foundation for her career that lies ahead, other life experiences — from her first time in labor to her rock-climbing hobby — should play a hand in her success.

**BIRTHING EXPERIENCE TRIGGERS CAREER GOAL**

"I went into nursing to become a nurse midwife," said Dengah, whose career epiphany came after the birth of her first child. "I hemorrhaged, and the midwife was definitely able to take over," she said.

Dengah said she didn’t grasp the seriousness of the situation until talking with her caregivers afterward.

"It could have been a bad story. But it wasn’t, because they knew what they were doing. And I realized: OK, this is what I want to do."

Dengah, who had two more midwife-assisted births, began looking at nursing programs. She chose CU Nursing largely for its rigorous curriculum and rich history of innovation and research, she said.

"It also had a midwifery program, and I liked the idea of having that continuity of education," Dengah said. "I knew this was the place that I could accomplish all of those things."

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‘It’s Like an Allegory for My Life’

FROM NURSING SCHOOL TO ROCK CLIMBING, GRADUATE REACHES FOR NEW HEIGHTS

By Debra Melani
STUDENT GOVERNMENT ROLE LEADS TO UNIFICATION

With a BSN in hand, Dengah will enter the Nurse-Midwifery Education program this August, leaving behind her undergraduate years packed with extracurricular experiences.

Dengah, who attended Colorado Nurses Association meetings before even coming to CU through its Integrated Nursing Pathway program, joined the CU Student Nurses Association (CUSNA).

“I fell in love with nursing associations, because I saw how people came together and created change and opportunity,” said Dengah.

Dengah served as president of CUSNA for more than a year, during which she led a successful transition of unifying student leadership between the south and Anschutz campuses.

“I also trusted people to take full charge of their roles,” Dengah said of initiating a roundtable-like leadership style. “I think that produces better outcomes.”

PROGRAM ALLOWS CHANGE: ONE PERSON AT A TIME

Dengah also served as the reproductive work group leader for the DAWN (Dedicated to Aurora’s Wellness and Needs) clinic as an undergraduate. The student-staffed clinic provides healthcare for the uninsured.

“For me, it just continued to underscore that idea that there are so many people who want access to care,” she said of her time at DAWN. “And if we all could just donate a little bit of our time as medical professionals... it’s not a fix, but it’s a way we can at least help this person right now.”

CU CONNECTIONS SHINE LIGHT ON RESEARCH, POLICY

Among about a dozen students selected for the Honors Research Program, Dengah went on to become one of only three who finished. “And we were able to present our research at the WIN (Western Institute of Nursing) conference in San Diego, so that was really cool.”

Dengah worked with her mentor, Lori Trego, PhD, a nurse midwife and military veteran, on a study evaluating the military environment’s effect on women members’ health.

A valuable mentor, Trego helped in Dengah’s decision to not stop at a master’s degree, she said. Dengah will pursue a PhD, and will work to influence public policy, an area in which she was also able to cut her teeth at CU, she said.

As student liaison on the Alumni Association board, Dengah was chosen to represent the university and testify against a bill that the board deemed detrimental to nursing. “It was really a great experience.”

ADVENTUROUS LIFESTYLE TRANSLATES TO LIFE

Although it might seem Dengah is all work and no play, that’s not the case. Dabbling in film school before coming to CU, Dengah has made entertainment connections, singing backup for some of her local artist friends and being part of two music videos.

Her exposure landed her other jobs, including as TV host for an adventure show that had her doing everything from paragliding to skydiving and as a ring girl for a the national MMA, which she still does.

But rock climbing is Dengah’s chief pastime. “It’s my main go-to, my moving meditation,” she said.

“When you are climbing, you have to focus on the task at hand. The climb is challenging, and it’s tricky, and you have to weigh out what your next moves are going to be. You have to stretch yourself mentally and physically to be able to get through it,” she said.

“‘I fell in love with nursing associations, because I saw how people came together and created change and opportunity.’

- Chantal Dengah

“‘But then you get to the top and you look down and see all that you’ve accomplished. It’s like, ‘Wow, I did that.’ And you have this beautiful vista. It’s like an allegory for my life.’

Dengah said she is glad she chose CU Nursing. "There are a lot of opportunities that CU offers that I wouldn't have had as much at other schools. If you are a graduate of CU, it means a lot.”
Wanderlust

“NOT ALL WHO WANDER ARE LOST”
- J.R.R. TOLKIEN

By Dana Brandorff

an Overton decided to become a nurse after a decade of adventuring and one escapade that brought him close to losing his foot.

An expert mountaineer, explorer, rock and ice climber, Overton said, “Through climbing, everything makes sense in the world. The chaotic environment slows down.”

After graduating in 2007 from CSU with a degree in Political Science, Overton decided to “do something else.” That something else included working for a heli-skiing operation in Alaska, hitchhiking through Europe, and eventually culminated in an international expedition to ascend Nanga Parbat in Pakistan where Overton acted as a climbing medic.

At the time, Overton was EMT-trained, but “not really prepared for what I encountered.” From leprosy to those crippled by polio, dysentery, and frostbite, “the experience was fairly outside my normal practice.” Then, while on the mountain, he developed high altitude cerebral edema as well as frostbite, and had to quickly descend to get help.

Sick and dehydrated, he eventually made his way to Islamabad where he developed Hepatitis A. Unable to leave his bed, parasites began feeding off necrotic tissue in his arms and shoulders. Fortunately, he had amoxicillin and other antibiotics in his med pack, which helped fight the infection. “That was the turning point for me. I felt broken down and alone, and I didn’t want others to feel that way. That’s when I decided to pursue health care.”

When he returned to the US, he started thinking about his next adventure and found that nursing beckoned. “I really felt a kinship to nursing because of the human touch that nurses provide versus what a physician or PA does.”

As Overton closes in on completing his BSN, he has his next adventure mapped out as a nurse with Swedish Hospital.

“That was the turning point for me. I felt broken down and alone, and I didn’t want others to feel that way. That’s when I decided to pursue health care.”

- Ian Overton

CU College of Nursing
Inspired to Better the System  By Katelyn Nolan

Sarah Williams chose the nursing profession for two reasons. From a young age, she felt the pull toward helping women during childbirth. Then, three years ago, her mother passed away from complications with diabetes. Unfortunately, the care that her mother received did not meet the family’s expectations. Inspired to better the system and fulfill her long-time goals, Williams landed on nursing as her career.

Because she received a GED rather than a high school diploma, Williams did not believe university was in her future. However, she discovered herself at CU Nursing. Even though she sometimes struggled to believe she could obtain and maintain high grades, she learned what she is capable of and is grateful for Assistant Professor Teresa Connolly. “She has an amazing teaching style. She’s tough, but understanding,” said Williams. Most of all, “She was considerate of different learning styles.”

Williams has two children (9 and 12), both of whom are incredibly supportive of her aspirations in nursing. According to Williams, “They think it’s awesome. They’ve been both patient and reasonable about my school work. I hope it inspires them to get a degree, no matter what.” Her children are not the only family members Williams has inspired. Her little sister is in high school. Once she graduates, she will be looking to the nursing programs here at the CU College of Nursing, too.

Working in a labor and delivery unit is Williams’ next step. As graduation approaches, she is in the thick of applying for positions. Ideally, she would like to pursue a MS in Midwifery here at CU Nursing. She has “loved the team environment and structure.”

GET TO KNOW

Marvin Mendez

Honors student, rollerblader, snowboarder, and soon-to-be nurse, Marvin Mendez recently presented research at the Western Institute of Nursing (WIN) Conference. A former Undergraduate Pre Health (UPP) student, Mendez originally graduated from CU Denver with degrees in Biology and Psychology, and a minor in Chemistry. “Upon graduating, I was unsure as to what I wanted to pursue in health care, but I saw the nurse lifestyle and determined that’s where I wanted to be. I love the holistic experience in nursing where you get to look at the entire patient.” He credits the UPP pipeline program for giving him exposure to a variety of health care fields and allowing him to explore what’s right for him. During UPP, students have opportunities to immerse themselves in the subject matter, do research with real-world applications, and engage in early clinical experiences. “When I graduated from CU Denver, I took out a piece of paper and wrote down a list of pros and cons and nursing came out on top! There’s so much room to move up and grow.” According to Mendez, a big part of his growth during nursing school occurred while he was an Advanced Care Partner (ACP) on the burn unit, as well as during a work-study position with AHEC where he presented obesity lectures, and taught high school students about organs and vital signs in the cadaver lab. Excited for what the future holds, Mendez is ready to live life and begin his journey as a nurse.
After graduating from CSU Pueblo’s accelerated nursing program in June 2013, Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP) student Terra Share worked as a psych mental health nurse. “The experience really set the stage for me to pursue a graduate degree,” said Share. Originally struggling with a choice between Women’s Health or Family Practice, Share said, “I’m glad I chose family practice as it provides a totally holistic approach to treatment. It expanded my viewpoint and now I have a passion for all ages — not just a specific segment of the population.”

During graduate school, Share distinguished herself as an outstanding student leader and was selected as the recipient of the May 2019 Graduate Student Leadership Award. She served on the FNP student-led, peer-to-peer mentorship program, and coordinated the mentor/mentee collaboration between 16 pairs of FNP students.

Juggling school, student leadership activities, and working full-time until just over a year ago, Share also managed to squeeze getting married into her packed schedule!