Clare Baker grew up racing mountain bikes and skiing in Colorado. Courtesy of the Vail Recreation District.
GRADUATION

“The Details of My Life Are Quite Inconsequential… Very Well, Where Do I Begin?”

- AUSTIN POWERS: INTERNATIONAL MAN OF MYSTERY

By Dana Brandorff

If it seems as if Alex Wilson has led an interesting life, you’d be right.

After receiving an undergraduate degree in Classical Studies from Colgate University in the 1990s, Wilson taught English in China for a few years. He then returned to the United States, where he waited tables, followed by a turn as an insurance agent. These “series of bad decisions,” as he calls them, have all made him who he is today.

In the mid-2000s, he earned his CNA and began working for the Veteran’s Administration (VA) from 2008 to 2012. He took a break and taught yoga. In 2014, “I re-evaluated where I was and decided I couldn’t make it as a yoga instructor/massage therapist.” So, he returned to the VA and decided to pursue a nursing degree through the UCAN program.

The VA sponsored him in school and through a little known initiative titled the National Nursing Education Initiative and the VA National Education for Employees Program, Wilson will graduate with minimal debt. The program paid his tuition and his salary during nursing school. All he has to do is work for the VA for the next three years. “I really like the VA. The nurse-to-patient ratio is low, so we can spend a lot of time caring for our patients.”

According to Wilson, “It’s been an interesting life, not necessarily an intelligent run.”

But that’s what makes Wilson unique. He brings a seasoned perspective to the program. One that includes a sense of humor and maturity.

As one of a dozen students over the age of 30 in the program, he founded the League of Older Nursing Students, also known as LOONS. The group supported each other during the program. “It’s hard to come back to school when you’re a little older. Learning how to learn and take tests is a skillset that you can lose over time,” said Wilson.
On Dec. 14, when Gurpreet Cheema accepts his nursing diploma on the stage in the Colorado Convention Center, it will be his second major life-changing ceremony this year.

“It was a big day,” he said, recalling his naturalization ceremony this past Sept. 11, when he became a U.S. citizen. “It was important, because I can stay with my wife forever, I can work, and I can dream of a good future for my kids.”

Cheema joined his wife in Colorado, with a pharmacy education from India, a food science education from Canada, and a strong interest in medicine. But he wanted a more interactive profession, he said. Again, his wife — who moved from India with her family to the Mile High state when she was young — influenced his next move. She suggested nursing as a way to nurture his caring nature.

Cheema found working with the Colfax Community Network, which supports some of Aurora’s most underserved children, a memorable part of his education. The after-school program, which includes many kids living in Colfax motels not far from campus, involved reading, providing nutritional food and spending quality time with the children, Cheema said. “It makes you feel really happy from the inside.”

By Debra Melani

**GRADUATION**

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**Colorado Daredevil Set to Graduate**

By Dana Brandorff

“I grew up racing mountain bikes and cross country Nordic skiing in Eagle,” said Clare Baker. The two sports took their toll on Baker’s body.

After suffering from concussions, broken ribs, and through hip surgery, Baker spent a fair amount of time in the hospital, where she met “the most incredible nurses who cared for me.”

Baker recalled, “They inspired me to pursue nursing because I hope to one day have an impact on patients like they did on me. Helping them feel less afraid and more comfortable.”

Having grown up in the mountains, Baker has lost friends to the elements. Because of that, “I wanted to learn how to save people who enjoy being outdoors and in the mountains as much as I do.” Before CU Nursing, Baker earned a degree in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. Subsequently, she became a Wilderness Emergency Medical Technician.

Post-graduation, Baker intends to become a flight nurse, where she will assist in search and rescue operations throughout Colorado. A perfect job for an outdoor-loving adventurer.

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**GET TO KNOW**

Chelsea Triolo

**Triple Threat** A triple scholarship winner and first-generation college student, Chelsea Triolo advises students to go for the scholarship. “The money has been extremely helpful in managing my debt,” said Triolo of CU Nursing’s accelerated program (UCAN). “I have learned so much and had some pretty fun experiences in applying for these awards. A lot of them are very creative and require us to do some soul searching.” Triolo frequently channels her creativity, including through art. In fact, she designed a logo and T-shirt for the LOONS – the League of Older Nursing Students.

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**NURSING FITS**

**GRADUATE’S CARING NATURE**

By Debra Melani

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Graduation 2019
When College of Nursing student Elizabeth DePalma, (MSN, ’18), graduates with her DNP Dec. 14 and takes off into the wild, blue yonder, she will leave behind a potentially life-saving legacy.

For her doctoral project, the psychiatric nurse practitioner focused on whether training students in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) could make a difference. It turns out it does — and the U.S. Air Force (USAF) second lieutenant’s work remains on track for many MHFA trainings to come.

An estimated third of all college students suffer from a mental illness. “In fact, 75% of lifetime mental illnesses occur before the age of 25,” DePalma said. Anxiety, depression, stress and sleep difficulties top the causes cited by students for decreased academic outcomes, she said.

What DePalma found especially concerning from her work with students on both the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus and the Colorado School of Mines campus in Golden was that 10% of students surveyed reported having “seriously considered suicide” in the past year.

It took a brush with his own mortality for Heftka to decide that the call of nursing was real. A climbing accident in 2014 where he broke his skull and sustained several bulged disks, as well as an ulcerative colitis diagnosis in 2016 and a five-day hospital stay, helped move him closer to nursing.

“The nurses really made a lasting impression,” said Heftka. “I was still trying to figure out what I really wanted to do with my life. So, I became a firefighter. However, the pull of nursing was strong.”

Later that year, he was admitted into CU’s UCAN program where he has made life-long friends, including Neal Luecking. The two have exemplified teamwork and professional partnership. According to faculty member Theresa Nino, “Finding a real life friend is extremely important to our students and the future of nursing! These two were good to each other and those around them.”

Stigma and lack of mental health literacy prevent students from seeking professional treatment, DePalma said. But they do tend to talk to and listen to their peers when it comes to emotional health issues, which is why MHFA training makes sense, she said.

The evidence-based program created for the layperson provides action plans for people who notice someone struggling with a mental health problem. The eight-hour training includes certification for three years and decreases stigma, studies show.

DePalma’s study included training and observing a group of peer mentors from Mines and students in the Integrated Nursing Pathway program from CU Nursing. The increased rates of study participants who noticed and helped peers in crisis five months post training were statistically significant, she said.

“These are results from just one training done months ago. Imagine what will happen as we offer more trainings,” DePalma said. “We’re talking about saving human lives here.”