

REDEFINING RETIREMENT FOR NURSES

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Introduction

“Youth is a gift of nature, but age is a work of art.”

—Stanislaw Jerzy Lec

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation (2017), there are over 3 million nurses in the United States, and approximately 1 million will be retiring in the next 5 to 10 years. You may be one of them. Because of demographics and the aging of the baby boomers (8,000–10,000 a day for the next 14 years), many readers of this book may be contemplating their own retirements in the not-too-distant future (Cilluffo & Cohn, 2017). Some approach the retirement decision with fear, avoidance, and denial, while others plan fastidiously and count the remaining days until the moment they are freed from work responsibilities. As with all things in life, there is no “typical” way to retire, and there is no one-size-fits-all, evidence-based best practice plan to approach retirement. Sure, the basics are known, including advice to stay active and engaged, maintain your health and stay fit, and avoid financial ruin by spending your money frugally, making sure to plan for a long life. According to the Social Security Administration, the average 65-year-old man today can expect to live to be 84.3 years old, and the average 65-year-old woman will live on average until the age of 86.6 years (2017). That’s nearly 20 years for a man and nearly 22 years for a woman. These years are a significant chunk of a person’s life, and often our planning and resource allocation for these years is overlooked or deferred until the very last moment. These years have the potential to be the “frosting on the cake” years, with many of the stresses and challenges of youth and middle age behind us and the vision of rest and relaxation on the horizon. The successful person pre-retirement has hopefully earned all degrees, successfully launched the children, set aside some money to maintain his/her lifestyle, and achieved a degree of self-confidence and comfort within his/her own skin. However, one must wonder if nurses face additional challenges in retirement. Does retirement from a lifelong career of caring, commitment, and service to others encourage higher self-expectations and a continuing need to find meaning?

Most nurse retirees have been very successful in their professional careers and contributed immensely to society in a wide variety of roles, including direct care, administration, research, and education. When facing retirement, many nurses assume “second careers” taking on part-time or volunteer opportunities with the goal of continuing to be relevant and have an opportunity to engage in meaningful work. Others wish to travel to exotic places or plan nothing specific but engage in trips without an end date. Others yearn for an extra moment lingering over a cup of coffee, not having to drive to work on a snowy day, or visiting the corner store or deli in their own neighborhoods. Others have definite plans, but health challenges and family obligations emerge, and as the saying goes, “The best laid plans” Our stories depict the personal journeys of nurses organizing and re-organizing their personal lives.

This book will provide information for nurses to dream large and expand their ideas of “retired life” by inspiring and informing readers regarding opportunities that may be available, as well as change their current thinking of “retired life” after a full professional career. Gone are the days of stereotypical retirement with older folks sitting in a rocking chair and waiting for time to pass. We present stories from 26 retired nurses and describe the different paths they have chosen after their retirement from full-time positions. We highlight the stories of a diverse racial and ethnic sample of nurses who are geographically distributed throughout the world. We have attempted to use exact quotes whenever possible to accurately depict the sentiment portrayed by our storytellers. We have listed their credentials exactly as they have provided them to us in order to reflect their state or national licensure, academic degrees, and certifications. Through their stories, these nurses describe how they have continued to contribute to society and leverage their talents as well as take on new ventures post-retirement building on the skills developed in their primary employment. The skills and achievements gained through life experiences form the foundation for development of a wide range of new opportunities for a meaningful transition into retired life.

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By sharing inspiring personal stories, these nurses will serve as role models for others, including the newly retired or those planning for future retirement. By highlighting these stories, newly retired nurses might find new interests that they may have deferred during their professional careers, such as starting a business, enjoying informed travel, serving as a volunteer or mentor, or developing new skills and hobbies. We have highlighted the positive by sharing stories of nurse colleagues who have aged successfully and are now reaping the rewards of a successful nursing career. Although written by nurses of a “certain age,” they depict the life journeys of men and women representing various racial and ethnic groups, and their stories illustrate how events that occurred early in their careers have profoundly influenced their life trajectories. These stories depict ordinary and extraordinary human experiences and provide insight into some of the ways nurses face retirement.

Some of the stories we share in this book clearly describe challenges that threatened to derail any and all retirement plans. As is typical of nurses, each challenge was addressed with strength, competence, and caring. Some of our nurses faced personal health challenges, loneliness, feelings of loss and separation from former lives, family caregiving responsibilities, and financial worries. Yet our storytellers do not wallow in self-pity or brood over loss. Instead, these challenges evoke the spirit of caring and joy of life that are branded into the souls of nurses. Nearly all our nurses recall events early in their careers when they were caring for seriously ill patients who were downtrodden and often mired in the direst circumstances, yet they persevered with strength and dignity. They often state that these experiences transformed them, providing a rock-solid foundation upon which to construct a meaningful human life.

Of course, once one has chosen to live a meaningful life, it becomes somewhat of a habit. One cannot just “turn off” the desire to care for others, avoid seeking satisfaction from helping others, or decline to mentor or guide young people who are considering entering our profession. However, how can one best put these skills to good use? What opportunities are the most meaningful and rewarding? How does one balance the

desire to continue to do good with the challenges of physical aging, time commitments to friends and family, and, most of all, joy and self-renewal?

Our book starts with two introductory chapters depicting pertinent issues related to aging, health, purpose, and meaning. At the end of the book, Appendix A has resources for those seeking further information to plan and guide their own journeys. The bulk of our book is devoted to the personal stories of our 26 retired nurses. These stories are compelling and we hope illustrative of the service, hope, commitment, and challenges faced by people who have enjoyed successful careers and have progressed into retirement. We hope these stories enhance your understanding of the issues other nurses have confronted and perhaps will serve as guides for those who are or will soon be in similar situations. The goal of this book is to share stories, enhance understanding, and perhaps promote and encourage positive action in others. We are, after all, nurses. It's in our DNA, and for most of us, our drive to make a difference will be with us until the last beat of our hearts. So, let's enjoy the journey!

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What does retirement look like for you?

You've devoted years of your professional career contributing to society by providing direct care, research, education, and leadership. But with retirement on the horizon, what's next? Through the shared stories of 26 retired nurses from around the world, you'll discover that the skills and achievements you have gained in nursing form the foundation for a meaningful transition into retired life.

Redefining Retirement for Nurses will help expand your ideas of retirement by sharing opportunities available to you and enhancing your understanding of how to leverage your talents in new ways. Authors Joanne Evans and Patricia Tabloski present experiences from retired nurses who have found meaning in various paths they have chosen after retiring from full-time nursing positions. Whether you are considering a "second career," volunteer opportunities, travel, or relaxing at home with family and friends, this book will provide the advice and tools you need to envision what your retired life should look like.

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