

## **Speech prepared for Ard Scoil na Deise Awards Night 18<sup>th</sup> November 2011**

Good evening ladies, gentlemen & students. I am very honoured to be invited by Mrs Hughes to speak to you on this night of celebration of your achievements. Tonight I would like to share my career path with you and hopefully demonstrate where choices, dreams and opportunities can take you.

I always refer to myself as a nurse, a teacher and a lifelong learner.

When I was growing up, I admired people, like my wonderful parents who went out of their way to help others whether it was in health or illness. Therefore I made a decision early in life that I would be in a career where I could help and support people.

At your age I could not decide between a career in nursing or teaching. I had read about wonderful people in the nursing and teaching professions like Florence Nightingale 'lady with the lamp' who was a pioneer of nursing and who first introduced training and education for nurses, Catherine McAuley founder of the Mercy order, (whom our school of nursing at UCC is named after) and Nano Nagle who established a network of schools for the poor in Cork and who also looked after the sick. I attended secondary school at the Presentation Convent here in Dungarvan and I was also greatly influenced by my teachers who inspired me by their enthusiasm for their subjects and interest in my future.

In the end I chose nursing and commenced my nurse training in 1979 in Dr Stevens Hospital Dublin. At that time nurse education was a three year certificate centred in the hospital. There were just ten of us who started nursing together. We stayed in the nurse's home for the first year – like boarding school and then moved out to share accommodation with friends. Much of the learning was done on the wards under the guidance of nurse tutors and senior staff nurses with a number of weeks each year in the nursing school. We had great fun, we supported each other and we remain friends to this day.

I have many stories of the experiences we had while we were students. There are too many to recount here so I will just tell you one. As students were not allowed to do anything really responsible until we were at least in our third year and almost qualified. One day when I was in second year and in the operating theatre my 'important' job was to tie the surgeons gown after he had scrubbed and sterilized his hands. As I hurried to do as I was asked I duly slid beneath his feet (as the floor was wet) and landed at the opposite side of the room. Of course I was swiftly sent out and

threatened with being packed home to my parents. Thankfully there weren't too many slip ups after that and I qualified in 1982.

I then worked as a staff nurse in orthopaedic and burns units where I gained experience in helping people recover from illness and accidents but also experienced the sadness of nursing people who did not recover. As a nurse I learned to provide care and comfort and to listen and show empathy to patients and their families. Over the years I have had the great privilege of caring for people both at the beginning and at the end of life.

After some experience in general nursing I went on to study midwifery in Scotland. There I learned how to support and care for mothers, before during and after the birth of their babies. I delivered many babies and each time was as wonderful a miracle as the first. I also learned to care for very tiny preterm babies.

It was during my midwifery training that my thoughts of teaching returned because I was involved in delivering prenatal classes for parents before babies were born and in teaching new mothers how to feed and care for their babies. I really liked this part of my work and when I qualified and returned to Ireland I was the one who was always given this job to do.

I married my husband in 1984 and we have four wonderful children. My young family kept me busy as you can imagine but after a number of years of working as a nurse and midwife I could see that the nursing profession was changing. Education had now moved to diploma and more opportunities were emerging for those who had furthered their education.

Encouraged by my husband and family I went back to education again beginning with a certificate in nursing management. It was then that the learning bug was reignited. My husband and children didn't know what they were getting themselves in to. There was no stopping me. We were in it for the long haul!

There was still no degree in nursing available to me in Ireland so I decided to pursue an honours degree in health service management. My first experience of third level education was exciting but difficult since this was the early 1990's and home computers were rare. The software was not user friendly and anyway I had no IT skills. Then I was sorry that I had never learned to type while I was at school. I eventually learned word processing and purchased a home computer. Assignments took so long. My eldest daughter still says that she suffered sleep deprivation from listening to the thud thud of my three fingers on the key board way into the night.

Studying for the degree opened up a new interest in education for me. I was learning about management theory, economics and law for the first time and I was challenged and delighted. In the meantime I also

continued to work as a staff nurse and later as the clinical nurse manager of a rehabilitation unit for older people.

Of course things did not always go smoothly. We were in a recession then too and jobs were scarce. I had been interviewed for a number of senior management positions but was not successful. Of course I was very disappointed at that time because I wanted to progress in my career but in the end it was for the best. If I had secured a more senior position I would not have taken the pathway I followed later. So disappointment can often lead to opportunity.

I always enjoyed attending lectures and the college environment. I realised how much new knowledge could change our way of looking at the world and I still really wanted to teach and be part of a learning environment. So I took steps to follow that path and my other dream. At first I decided to do a short teaching skills course in WIT and two months after I was conferred with my degree I registered for a master's degree in education.

One of my lecturers in WIT encouraged me to teach and provided me with my first opportunity at an adult evening class. The first time I stood in front of a class I will never forget. The students were qualified nurses who had returned to college to do a certificate in nursing management. I had practiced my lesson all day and by the time I got there I was ready to collapse with excitement and fear. At first I could barely speak and I was trying to stop my legs shaking – I am sure the students could see. But once I got going I began to enjoy the rapport with the class, we shared experiences in nursing practice and it felt great. I knew then that I had made the right decision and was grateful for the encouragement I had received.

In 1998 the government commissioned a review of nurse education and money was provided for the development of a University based nursing degree. I was very lucky; I had just completed my Master's Degree so was educationally prepared to teach at third level when the nursing degree began. I applied for and secured a position as lecturer in UCC in 2001 and a whole new chapter was opened in my learning.

I began to develop teach and manage courses and my work became part of an exciting era of national development in nursing. In UCC student numbers have grown from under 600 in 2001 to 1200 + today.

In the spirit of life-long learning I continued to develop my own education so in 2005 I decided to pursue a doctorate (PhD) through research. Thankfully I was conferred with my PhD last year. It was a lovely day of celebration and relief for my family. My children do not remember a time when I was not studying. I must say that without their support and a very patient husband I would not have achieved my goals.

My role in UCC today is a combination of directing programmes, curriculum development, and teaching. I also support students in their clinical practice and in research. I have had the good fortune to have achieved both of my career dreams. It has been hard work and I continue to learn but I love what I do. So you can see that throughout my career in nursing I have taken opportunities open to me for further education and as a result I was able to have many different career experiences.

Nursing is a wonderful career.

It has been described as an art and a science. Nurses use science e.g. anatomy, physiology, chemistry, and knowledge of psychology and sociology to make decisions but there is also the important art of compassion, communication and respect for human dignity. Aside from the various areas in which nurses can practice (e.g. in hospitals with children to older people, in emergency situations, surgery, in the areas of intellectual disability and mental health and in the community) nurses can become specialists and advanced practitioners in their own areas. It is a career full of variety and you can work all over the world.

To remain competent however nurses must be committed to life-long learning and there are many more opportunities for nurses today than what were available to me.

In my present position I manage programmes for nurses who return to university to pursue further education in their specialist areas. I also supervise students who do research and I continue to conduct research myself. My area of research is focused on working with older people to improve their care and now that I am approaching old age myself I am more interested than ever!

You young ladies may know exactly what you want to do and you may realize your dreams very early in life. On the other hand life could throw up some surprises and you could find yourself doing something very different to what you had planned at the outset and that is ok. I hope that some of you will choose to become nurses and that all of you will be lifelong learners. I hope to will meet you in UCC someday. If you are there come to Brookfield Health Sciences Complex and say hello.

Congratulations to you all. I wish you all the very best for your futures and thank you for inviting me.

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