



*Joanne Evans, MEd, RN, PMHCNS-BC*

## **From Candy Striper to RV'er!**

### **Joanne Evans, Greater USA**

This story is about a remarkable nurse who has enjoyed an expansive professional nursing career for over 45 years. Joanne knew from a very young age that she wanted to be a nurse and began her career in high school as a candy striper in a local hospital. As a 14-year-old candy striper, Joanne enjoyed delivering newspapers and snacks to patients and their families and spending time listening to their stories. Joanne's dedication and enthusiasm were noticed; the local newspaper published an article about the work she did as a candy striper and shared her picture in her uniform. She was clearly off to a good start!

High school was academically challenging for Joanne as she had auditory processing learning disabilities, which were undiagnosed and unrecognized in the early '60s, resulting in mixed academic grades, with the sciences being particularly difficult. Her guidance counselor knew that Joanne wanted to be a nurse but recognized that she might have difficulty being accepted into a nursing program due to her science grades. She therefore suggested Joanne apply as a physical education major to a small private college that allowed students to change majors once they were accepted and before they started their freshmen year. This was a perfect solution as Joanne was accepted into this school and then transferred to nursing.

Upon graduation, Joanne began her career on a medical-surgical unit—which was recommended for all new graduates—in a major urban hospital in Boston. Within a short time, she became the charge nurse on the evening shift and was well-liked and respected by her colleagues. The staff nurses frequently told her how much they appreciated the way she prioritized pain medication for post-operative patients, because they recognized these patients healed more quickly and began to ambulate earlier in their recovery. Pain experts now agree with Joanne’s approach and note she was ahead of the curve in her thinking!

Joanne then moved to New Hampshire to care for patients in a small intensive care unit (actually a home that had been converted to a hospital in a major New Hampshire ski resort). This position allowed her an opportunity to ski and continue her passion to provide care to those with serious medical problems in a small community hospital. This experience increased Joanne’s awareness of her patients’ fear and anxiety regarding their injuries and upcoming transfer to other facilities for additional treatment and care.

Joanne then moved on to a large hospital in Virginia, accepting a position in the psychiatric unit because there was a shortage of psychiatric nurses and no openings in the medical-surgical units. Although reluctant, she found she excelled in communicating with those who were experiencing severe emotional distress and enjoyed her work thoroughly, prompting her return to school to earn a master’s degree from the University of Virginia with a specialty in counseling education. Shortly thereafter in 1976, she received her certification as an adult psychiatric mental health clinical nurse specialist. The next step in Joanne’s career was the opportunity to work in emergency service programs in local mental health centers. She was the first psychiatric clinical nurse specialist to join a team of psychologists, social workers, and physicians.

Several years later, Joanne moved to North Carolina with her family and took 2 years off to be with her three children. Later, she joined the faculty at a state university for a year, supervising students in mental

health settings, combining her love of teaching with her expertise in community mental health nursing. Additionally, Joanne's role-modeling and advocacy for her patients helped students decrease their feelings of stigma toward those with mental health issues.

While in North Carolina, Joanne also continued her volunteer work and served as the president of the county Learning Disability Association and representative to the state board. In that role, she helped to develop a summer program for children with learning disabilities to prevent them from falling behind their peers over the summer break. Of course, Joanne made sure everyone also had lots of fun while attending.

After 3 years in North Carolina, she returned to Maryland and was asked to direct a grant to produce a play developed for children to teach them about "good" and "bad" touch. Joanne and company visited several schools in the state of Maryland and worked with local Child Protective Services when needed if children revealed they had been abused or touched inappropriately. Joanne later became the clinical director of a sexual abuse trauma program for adult and child victims of sexual abuse, and received recognition from the Maryland governor for her efforts.

Joanne then decided to return to the emergency department. For the next 12 years, twice a week, she evaluated psychiatric patients in a community emergency department while also teaching psychiatric nursing in an academic setting. It was in this setting that she became certified in holistic nursing, and she integrated music therapy into the care of psychiatric patients in the emergency department.

In 2004, Joanne was selected to bring her education, leadership, and organizational leadership skills to the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC), where she was employed for 10 years on the management team. In this role, she received awards and recognition for her leadership and volunteer work.

*Nursing Spectrum* twice honored Joanne for her volunteer work, which also included travel to New Orleans for hurricane relief efforts after Katrina. Joanne utilized her mental health background to find placements for psychotic patients who were living in shelters and temporary housing. Joanne also accompanied displaced adults on “tour buses” to the 9th Ward to witness the storm’s devastation of their neighborhoods. Later she organized her friends and colleagues to provide holiday gifts for over 200 families who had lost all they owned and were living in trailer parks. She also traveled on medical missions to the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Ecuador, where she assessed and cared for local inhabitants in need of care. Joanne acknowledges that these experiences were crucial to her personal development and states, “I was reminded once again of the strength of the human spirit and the coping ability of those who had so little.”

After a very successful full-time career in nursing, Joanne retired in 2014 with many wonderful ideas of what she would like to continue to do in this new phase of her life. When Joanne met with her financial advisor to discuss future plans, he was so impressed with all her plans that he asked her if she wanted to do presentations for him, because he had many clients who were entering this “retirement phase.” Joanne’s response was “absolutely not” because she thought she still had much more to learn about this new phase.

Joanne decided to start talking with other nurses about what they were doing in their retirement. This is actually the same way Joanne has gone about entering all new life phases. First, she asks people to tell her what they are doing and then uses this information to look at all the options.

After a couple of months of retirement, Joanne returned to ANCC as an independent consultant on a very part-time basis and worked on various projects in 2014, 2015, and 2016. She was easing into retirement!

In addition to other projects, Joanne has a longstanding interest in health and plant-based nutrition, and she has started a business educating others about the benefits of a plant-based diet. She serves as the executive director. She has spoken on plant-based nutrition and chronic disease at many national nursing conferences and meetings; published articles on this topic for national nursing journals; and completed studies, with lab data, to enhance public knowledge and improve the daily lives and health of nurses and others.

In addition, Joanne continues to volunteer in community organizations, including an advisory board for an organization providing services to survivors of sexual abuse and an organization supporting adolescents lacking life independence skills who were raised in foster care who have not been adopted. Joanne loves being a grandmother and will drop almost everything when her children call and request her assistance. In addition, she takes them all on road trips that are always fun and filled with new adventures.

This year, at the age of 68, Joanne decided to make one more major change. After living in the Washington, DC area for 42 years, she sold her home and is now a full-time RV'er! Selling her home was a major decision and one she did not make easily. She would be leaving longstanding friendships, community groups she had started, a spiritual community she was active in, and healthcare professionals as well as contractors she was very familiar with. She purchased a 30-foot RV, which sleeps six, and plans to travel extensively throughout the United States. In addition to sharing her traveling adventures with children, grandchildren, and friends, she expects to sign up to be a member of the DOVES, which is a group of RV'ers that help the Red Cross in disaster areas.



## **NURSE STORIES**

### **DOING IT ALL ON YOUR TERMS**

Through retirement, Joanne has been able to continue to contribute to society and focus on the nursing projects she feels most passionate about, including education, volunteering, and promotion of healthy lifestyles. In addition, she has established a successful business, socializes with friends and colleagues throughout the United States, travels, and enjoys the opportunity to spend more time with her family, grandchildren, and friends.

She states, "This phase of life, called retirement, has opened up new opportunities for me and allowed me to continue to share my professional talents and life skills as well as bring new ventures. I can't wait to see what comes next."

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Who would ever have believed that the dedicated young candy striper would go on to have such a wonderful, exciting, and challenging career? We thank Joanne for sharing her story and challenging us to follow in her footsteps!