

Beyond hospital walls

Edith-Rose Cairns tried university 10 years ago, and thought it wasn't for her – but after several years working in banking in Toronto, she realized that she wanted a career where she could help as many people as she could.

This week Cairns will graduate with a bachelor of nursing and will deliver the valedictory address at the University of New Brunswick Saint John.

She's a full believer that nurses are a vital component of the community.

"A nurse's job extends far beyond the walls of a hospital," she explains. "If you're looking at the determinants of health – what keeps people healthy and happy – it's not just your biological functioning. It's very much your social environment, what kind of support that you have, your upbringing, and so many different socioeconomic factors that really contribute to health."

While Cairns knows that not everyone will always want the help of a nurse, there's always something she can do to maximize a person's potential.

"Whatever stage of life that they're in, whatever process they're going through, there's always something a nurse can do to enhance the situation."

From UNB to the community

On top of an A average, Cairns spent much of her time at UNB Saint John volunteering in both on campus and in the community.

"I really tried to take as many opportunities as possible to get involved," she says.

She served as president of the UNB Saint John Nursing Society from 2007 to 2009, and gave the society a strong community focus during her term.

"Rather than just having a few social events per year, I saw that the society was an excellent avenue to really promote collaboration and start a lot of camaraderie between the different years of the program. I thought, what a wonderful opportunity to bridge the gap and start helping students to know one another."

Cairns launched a peer mentor program within the nursing program that saw first-year students pair with senior nursing students for support and experience, which helped many get involved with the school and community outside of the classroom.

Under her guidance, the society went from having a just few events per school year to 18, many in conjunction with community organizations.

“We do a lot of fundraising and charity work, whether it’s trick-or-treating on Halloween for groceries for the food bank or having drives for local women’s shelters. We also promote many professional development opportunities for our students.”

Cairns has worked tirelessly to support and promote nursing as a profession and to get students involved outside of the classroom.

“It’s important for Saint John to see that a small group of 50 nurses come out of UNB every year that are really caring, genuine nurses – and they want to do as much as they can outside of working at the regional.

A healthy start to her career

This year’s valedictorian is headed to northern Manitoba after graduation to be a public health nurse in charge of a brand-new community health centre in a small First Nations community.

“This community has never had a nurse before, so this is something new for both them and me.”

She credits the nursing program at UNB Saint John with giving her the edge she needed to get the job.

“It’s a huge job for a new grad,” she says. “I’m really excited. I’ve gotten a lot of community experience, since our nursing program here is different than a lot of nursing programs. They really highlight community nursing. The experience that I gained here, including my choices for clinical placement, really made me eligible for this kind of job.”

Cairns says she wouldn’t trade her education at UNB Saint John for anything.

“I will always talk up Saint John as being a world-class educational opportunity. I’m the first one to say that a lot of my success has come from simply being at this university.



“I really feel that if I was still up in Toronto that I would just be one of hundreds that get put through every year. In this program of 50 people, there are phenomenal opportunities.”