

# WRITING THE Last Chapter

## PLNU SCHOOL OF NURSING PROFESSOR ADVISES TACKLING END-OF-LIFE ISSUES NOW

**L**ois Wagner loves life. She lives in a funky San Diego beach neighborhood known as Mission Beach, gets a kick out of inline skating, goes hiking and adores being a grandmother. She also loves to talk about death and dying.

Article series by  
Anita Palmer

Wagner, a professor in PLNU's School of Nursing since 1996 whose teaching focus includes end-of-life care, has spent a lifetime helping people die as peaceful a death as possible. She also knows a great deal about helping loved ones cope with death. One of her best pieces of advice? "When you don't know what to do, sit down," she said, smiling.

Point Loma Nazarene University's School of Nursing has graduated more than 1,200 qualified and caring nurses from its program since it was established in 1974. Wagner and her colleagues teach student nurses the dynamics around end-of-life situations and how to best serve the patient's physical, emotional and spiritual needs. But she thinks everyone should tackle the topic.

This fall she will teach a course called Perspectives on Death and Dying, open to all majors.

Wagner, who was involved in the formation of the nursing program while the institution was located in Pasadena, spent two decades in Washington, D.C., helping found Community of Hope Health Services and six years at Joseph's House, a Washington, D.C., home she helped found for homeless men with AIDS and other ailments. Her postgraduate work at the University of Southern California was in gerontology and end-of-life care; her master of science degree from UCLA specializes in mental health nursing.

"Learning to accompany people as they make transitions in life, such as birth, death, recovery from illness, or substances abuse, is a focus of my practice and teaching," said Wagner, who is certified as a trainer for the End of Life Nursing Education Consortium. She partners with the San Diego Hospice to lead a workshop for nursing students and professionals on compassionate care for the dying.

Wagner also has a special heart for serving and helping students learn to care for and serve those who are marginalized in society and underserved in health care. This led her to participate in the School of Nursing's Health Promotion Center. (See accompanying story on page 5.)



This year's torturous public spectacle around the fate of Terri Schiavo brought to national attention the value of planning ahead and thinking about how you would like the end of your life to be handled. It's not an easy topic, Wagner knows, but it also is not one to be avoided or feared.

**THE JOURNEY THROUGH THE 'VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH' IS AS UNIQUE AS EACH INDIVIDUAL, SAID WAGNER. YET THERE ARE SOME THINGS WE CAN DO TO MAKE THE JOURNEY MORE PEACEFUL.**



Lois Wagner

Society doesn't make it easy, though. Part of what PLNU student nurses learn is that modern Western civilization denies or hides death's existence. Even among Christians the topic is avoided, or approached with fear and trepidation. We may turn to prayer, but are often confused in our faith when a loved one dies.

Also, Americans like to be able to fix troublesome things. That goes double for health professionals, some of whom tend to view death as failure, Wagner notes.

Wagner often finds herself gently reminding people that death is an unavoidable mystery of life. Ignoring it won't make it go away. In addition, with the advent of modern medicine, the dying process often is lengthened, leading to long stays in hospitals or nursing homes. Researchers say most people prefer to die at home, but 77 percent die in institutions (53 percent in hospitals, 24 percent in nursing homes).

In the last 50 years there has been a growth in hospice and palliative care. In both settings the patient and the family are the primary unit of care.

Hospice is a program of care that provides medical and support services in a variety of settings by an interdisciplinary team for patients and their families facing a life-threatening illness. In addition to the patient and family, the team might include a nurse, a social worker, a home health aide, a physical therapist, an art therapist or aromatherapist, a nutritionist, a pharmacist, a chaplain, a



## PLNU's School of Nursing

### UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE PROGRAMS HAVE STELLAR REPUTATIONS

The School of Nursing was established as a division at Pasadena College in the early 1970s by Laura Mae Douglass. Its first nursing graduates in 1974 had to remain in Pasadena while the college moved to San Diego in 1973 because their clinical affiliations were in that city.

The School of Nursing, now in PLNU's College of Social Sciences and Professional Studies, was accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) upon its first application, and for the full 10-year term that is attainable. Both the baccalaureate and master's degree programs are CCNE-accredited.

Nursing is the second largest undergraduate major on the San Diego campus. Interestingly, of the students accepted into the program, between 10 and 15 percent are male. The national average is approximately 5 percent.

PLNU has graduated more than 1,200 nurses since the program was established. One of its most prominent alumni is Patricia E. Benner, R.N., Ph.D., FAAN, one of the foremost nurse ethicists and scholars in the world.

"With the critical shortage of qualified professional nurses in California, PLNU's nursing graduates are in great demand," said Dottie Crummy, dean of the school. "PLNU is justly proud of the fine reputation its nursing graduates have established locally and around the world."

After nearly a quarter of a century in the Starkey B building, the school moved to the remodeled Taylor Hall in the summer of 2000. The new location houses a portion of the rare-book collection of Irene Sabelberg Palmer, the nation's foremost scholar of Florence Nightingale. Palmer also founded the University of San Diego's Philip Y. Hahn School of Nursing and Allied Health Sciences.

In addition, the School of Nursing was the recipient of a sculpture of Florence Nightingale created in 1862 by her cousin, Hilary Bonham Carter. A rare first printing of Florence Nightingale's *Notes on Nursing*, first published in 1860, is displayed with the sculpture in the school's office.

Another unique feature of the School of Nursing building is the Margaret Stevenson Infant Friendly Room. The room, with a rocking chair, diaper-changing area, sink facilities, and refrigerator, was a project spearheaded by Stevenson, professor emeritus of nursing and former dean of professional studies.

In 2002 Point Loma began offering a master of science in nursing degree program at PLNU Mission Valley. It focuses on the education role of the nurse and features four clinical nurse specialist options (advanced medical-surgical, gerontology, psychiatric/mental health and family health nursing). ■

bereavement counselor, a physician, a volunteer, and a homemaker.

More hospitals are including a palliative care unit these days, as well. Palliative care is similar to hospice care but is available to patients who do not respond to curative treatment and are expected to live longer than six months.

"The biggest benefit is pain and symptom management," said Wagner, adding that this means physical, spiritual and emotional pain. "The journey through the 'valley of the shadow of death' is as unique as each individual," she said. Yet there are some things we can do to make the journey more peaceful.

An aid to finding that peace at the end of life is to have decided beforehand how you want the last stages to be handled.

Wagner recommends families talking about this topic before illness strikes. She wishes more churches provided classes and workshops to help. One tool she recommends is the "Five Wishes" living will booklet, available from an organization called Aging with Dignity ([www.agingwithdignity.org](http://www.agingwithdignity.org)). Providing guidance along the way, the booklet prompts participants to work through five areas:

- The person I want to make health care decisions for me when I can't make them for myself.
- My wish for the kind of medical treatment I want or don't want.
- My wish for how comfortable I want to be.
- My wish for how I want people to treat me.
- My wish for what I want my loved ones to know.

Even if the paperwork's in place, the emotions and demands surrounding the dying of a loved one can be overwhelming. If you're a caretaker of a dying person, or even facing death yourself, and you don't know what to do, Wagner's advice is to sit down, hush up, stop trying to fix things, and be still for a while. She brings up the concept of what she calls *the gift of presence*.

"We need to know how to be present with someone who's dying when there's nothing you can do. It involves 'intention,'" said Wagner. Being present with the dying requires paying close attention, putting aside one's own fears



Nursing students (from sophomore to M.S.N.) have access to excellent clinical experiences all over the San Diego community.

**Nursing Major Now a Lieutenant Colonel: Jeffrey Ashley (85) is a leader in the nursing field. See page 15.**

and discomfort. It involves gentleness and letting go.

She recognizes that it's sometimes awkward to be around a dying person. "We tend to ignore them," she said. People don't know what to say, so they don't say anything.

Family and friends are key to the power of presence. It comes down to relationships. During her years of end-of-life nursing, Wagner says, she has seen many relationships find healing during the last stages of dying.

The last months of illness for Wagner's father were rocky, with many ups and downs. One day Wagner asked him, "Dad, what do you think heaven is going to be like?"

He simply said, "Relationships."

His life as a minister and a church leader had focused on relationships. And then he said, "But you know, it's really a great mystery."

Wagner recalls the scene that occurred when her mother-in-law was dying. "All the family was around her, singing, holding hands, celebrating her life. She was at peace. We were at peace."

Sounds like what we all should plan for. ■

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## Promoting Health and Service

### PLNU HEALTH PROMOTION CENTER AIDS STUDENT LEARNING, GIVES AID TO UNINSURED

**M**argaret Stevenson has always had a heart for those in need. During her years as chair of the nursing program at Point Loma Nazarene University, she saw firsthand how the lack of health care and basic information can ruin lives needlessly.

So Stevenson, who retired in 1999, founded the Health Promotion Center in 2000. With help from her fellow faculty and lots of friends, she responded to an invitation from the congregations of the Church of the Nazarene in Mid-City to use part of their facility in San Diego's City Heights neighborhood.

The Health Promotion Center has evolved from a site where student nurses and faculty provided screenings for diabetes, hypertension, and tuberculosis to a permanent primary-care and health advocacy center, although it cannot be labeled a clinic. In September 2003 the PLNU School of Nursing joined the San Diego Health & Faith Alliance, a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving the uninsured. Among the participants are medical and pharmacy students and faculty from the University of California, San Diego; counseling students from the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at the University of San Diego; trainees in a San Diego clinical pastoral program; plus volunteers from faith-based groups such as the homeless shelter St. Vincent de Paul Village, Catholic Charities, the Episcopal Diocese of San Diego, and others.

"There are so many people without medical insurance. We provide services to those without health care," said Stevenson, who supervises along with Mary Margaret Rowe, center director and associate professor of nursing.

The HPC is open two days a week, with up to 15 students and faculty in the center on an average day. In addition to primary health care and physical examinations, there are free screenings for depression, blood pressure, skin cancer, and diabetes, plus free education on many topics. In addition to providing health care, the focus is on helping

students develop cross-cultural skills in an environment of service learning. The location lends itself to cross-cultural outreach. The Church of the Nazarene in Mid-City was founded by former PLNU sociology professor Ron Benefiel (now president of Nazarene Theological Seminary). It is the setting for Cambodian, Creole, Samoan, Spanish-speaking, Sudanese, and English-speaking congregations.

Every spring the School of Nursing holds a community Festival of Health at the center, drawing hundreds for its free health screenings, education, referrals, games and ethnic food.

The center started with a grant of \$92,639 from the Helene Fuld Health Trust (HSBC). In 2003 the center received a grant from the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives for \$39,691. In late 2004 the center was awarded \$122,000 from the Alliance Health-care Foundation of San Diego. Other sources that helped keep the center alive include the Compassion Capital Fund, the San Diego Health and Faith Alliance, PLNU, a \$50,000 Revitalization Grant from the San Diego Revitalization Corporation, and a number of generous anonymous donors.

"We have so much more we can do," said Dottie Crummy, dean of the School of Nursing. "There are many needs out there." ■



*HPC director Mary Margaret Rowe and founder Margaret Stevenson.*

