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Gene Harkless, Associate Professor of Nursing

Jennifer Lee

University of New Hampshire

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mentor highlights

When Dr. **Gene Harkless** DNSc, ARNP, CNL, associate professor of nursing, talks of teaching and learning, she often speaks of journeys. This is not surprising since all her life she has travelled in search of new experiences. Early in her career at the University of New Hampshire, a study trip to Brazil launched her into international nursing education. Every year aspiring nurses, mentored by Dr. Harkless, spend months in such faraway places as Wales, Australia, Ghana or Norway to learn about different nursing practices.

The initials after her name indicate she is a family nurse practitioner, licensed by the state, as well as a certified clinical nurse leader. At UNH since 1985, she, like many UNH faculty, practices what she teaches. She has worked for more than twelve years as a nurse practitioner at Families First, a federally funded community health center in Portsmouth.

Dr. Harkless still gets Christmas cards from former students, now in their forties with children, especially from those she has mentored. "I realize," she says, "how much I love working with students, especially in a one-on-one relationship, like colleagues." Students usually find this relationship only with a mentor, and it often includes collaborating on research grant proposals, which is not an easy job. However, "getting them to think more broadly is my nourishment," she says, smiling. But students must do the hard work themselves: "I am there to help, but they must take that intellectual journey themselves." For many, that journey does culminate in a pot of gold for their research project.

Her journey through nursing began at Duke University, where at the time, she says, the nursing curriculum was quite unstructured and sprinkled with liberal arts courses. "It was a formative experience," she recalls. "Somehow it all worked. It taught me how to think and learn, and I came to love both the practice and thinking of nursing." After graduation she joined the US Public Health Service and worked for the Indian Health Service in a fourteen-bed hospital in rural Nevada. The closest referral center was ninety miles away. After a little more than a year there, she went to a public health position in rural Manitoba, Canada. At both places her colleagues were young and inexperienced. "We all learned together," she remembers. "One thing I learned was that there are different ways of doing the same procedure. Medicine is not black and white." Such trans-cultural experiences, especially when young, are important, she feels, to the formation of a nurse and her perspective on healthcare systems.



Dr. Harkless with student nurses Ashley Barbour ('08), in front, and Shari Davis ('08), Ghana, 2007



A graduate degree, she knew, would give her more authority, and she chose Vanderbilt University to become a nurse practitioner. Wishing to return to the New England area after graduation, she worked for the Visiting Nurses Association in Manchester, New Hampshire, and then at Dartmouth College in pediatric oncology. "I was given much responsibility at Dartmouth, and I thrived," she says. That prodded her to go to Boston University to get a doctorate in nursing science.

Dr. Harkless conducting a medical exam in Ghana, 2007.

Along the way she found time for marriage and three children. The family lives in Alton, New Hampshire, where her husband, Peter Farrell, is a consulting forester with New England Forestry Consultants. Currently, their children are all in different colleges out of state. “Must be because Mother is at UNH,” she laughs. She tells her children that what she wants them to get out of a college education is a close working relationship with a faculty member, where they can “drop in and talk, ask questions,” and where the teacher “will engage you in conversation and get you to think differently about things.” Clearly, this is the experience she offers her students, both on campus and in such different places as Africa and Australia.

“I have always been interested in aboriginal people,” Dr. Harkless says, “ever since I worked with the Shoshone and Paiute peoples in Nevada and the Inuit in Manitoba.” She found that rural New Hampshire offered parallels in how residents accessed medical care and what kind of care they got. She liked the fact that she could go into the schools, talk with local doctors and make visits to patients’ homes.

New Hampshire, she continues, is one of the best states in which to be a nurse practitioner. The state doesn’t require nurse practitioners to have physician supervision or collaboration, and allows them access to a full formulary of drugs. (The state Board of Nursing provides oversight of their practice.) So, she feels, “we are truly nurses in advanced practice, who can provide care based on our own license.” That means that, as a teacher, she must educate future nurse practitioners to think and reason about their practice, to learn more than just protocol: “They must learn how to deal with ill-structured situations under uncertain conditions, and how to cope with them, how to cope with ambiguity.”



With village children in Ghana, 2007

Her own travels have included uncertain conditions such as in Ghana where she went in 2007 to study family decision-making during illness in rural communities. Two Fulbrights have taken her first to Norway and then India. As part of Project Hope, she spent forty-two days aboard the USS Mercy in the South Pacific. Recently, she was selected as one of three US nurses out of thirty-two nurses to attend meetings of the International Council of Nursing Leadership in Switzerland. This past summer she was in Swaziland and South Africa looking at clinical practices as well as for connections for UNH nursing students. Along with all this, Dr. Harkless continues as a visiting professor and researcher in Norway.

Dr. Harkless’ mentoring has included working with many students on writing articles for *Inquiry*, based on their research experiences.

Writing for *Inquiry*’s broad audience is a worthwhile experience for

nurses, she believes, even though their work is not as difficult to understand as, say, a chemist’s. Writing is developmental, she notes: “It’s a journey, and you move one step at a time.”

The future? “I have developed a lot of breadth; now I want to develop some depth,” says Dr. Harkless. She is interested in looking at eldercare issues and aspects of primary care for children—both internationally, of course. She smiles and adds, “What I will do when I grow up!”

Inquiry articles written by mentees of Dr. Harkless:

- Allison Reilly, *Inquiry* ‘10: Cultural Reform in Acute Care: Learning from Australia’s Improving the Culture of Hospitals Project
- Lindsay Bergmann, *Inquiry* ‘10: Living Positively: An Inside Look at HIV Counseling and Testing in Uganda
- Emily Roberts, *Inquiry* ‘08: Nursing in Uganda: My Summer of Unexpected Discoveries
- Jennifer Herman, *Inquiry* ‘07: Well Child Health Care in Wales: A Change of Setting, a Shift of Power
- Cristina Joseph, *Inquiry* ‘06: “My Mind Is Like a Dark Storm Cloud”: Observations and Experiences in Norwegian Dementia Care