

REALITIES CHRONICLED

New book offers dialogue, tips, strategies, humor — and a great read for nurses BY KAY BENSING, MA, RN

●●● A FEW MONTHS AGO, I SERVED on a panel and talked to a new class of accelerated nursing students at Drexel University College of Nursing and Health Professions, Philadelphia. These individuals are second-degree, second-career students with varied backgrounds and experiences. The professor's objective for this class was to have these fast-track students get an idea, early in the program, about one of nursing's best features — the endless opportunities. Three other nurses and I shared our stories about the career paths we chose.

Before the class started, I met and chatted briefly with Kelli Dunham, BSN, RN, one of the panelists. As she recounted her story to the students, it was hard to believe this dynamic 36-year-old has accomplished so much in nursing since graduating from Hahnemann University in 1998.

Found Niche

Dunham began her career at the Drexel University nurse-managed health center in North Philadelphia. Since 2001, her practice has been in community outreach with high-risk, new mothers through Drexel's Nurse-Family Partnership. This opportunity to provide care for young mothers with so many unmet needs seemed like a natural transition for her. Before she decided to pursue nursing, the energetic nurse served as a volunteer missionary in underserved populations in the United States and Haiti.

Not wanting to sugarcoat the realities of nursing for these new students, Dunham confided not all of her patients have happy outcomes. In fact, when she mentioned her youngest patient was 12, more than a few in the audience seemed shocked.

But, in this community, with these young women, this talented nurse blends her skills, interests and passions and knows she does make a difference in their lives. For

Dunham, this is what nursing is all about — she found her niche.

Stand-Up Comedian

A big reason Dunham stays positive in her work relates to the peripatetic nurse's night job as a stand-up comedian. Certainly, the talent to entertain audiences locally and across the country provides the public health nurse with a great escape and reduces her burnout risk. But, the neat part about her talent as a humorist is that she incorporates it into her practice.

When things seem bleak for her young patients, Dunham injects humor at the right time and helps them not dwell on their hardships.

"Many of her patients say they wouldn't have made it through their pregnancies without Kelli," offered Patricia Gerrity, PhD, RN, FAAN, associate dean for community programs, Drexel College of Nursing and Health Professions and director of the Eleventh Street Family Health Services, talking about how Dunham's use of humor strengthens her bond with patients.

Published Author

When I met Dunham and learned she also had published two books, I wanted to know what herbal supplement she took to jumpstart her energy. I wanted to purchase some immediately.

Author Dunham published her first book in 2001, just 3 years after she graduated from nursing school. *How to Survive & Maybe Even Love Nursing School* (F.A. Davis Co., 2001) is a humorous guide for nursing students that is required reading at Drexel. In this entertaining text, there is solid information that helps students navigate the classroom and clinical mazes. The information presented is not just the author's views, but those of 300 nurses she interviewed.



With a good response to her first book, Dunham and colleague Staci Smith, RN, C, a 20-year veteran with experience in many different nursing specialties, recently published *How to Survive & Maybe Even Love Your Life as a Nurse* (F.A. Davis Co., 2005). Dunham recognized if she were to write this book, she needed a nurse with extensive hospital experience and Smith was her choice. Again, more than 300 nurses were interviewed and their experiences and wisdom included.

Treat Yourself

Dunham and Smith offer a must-read for all nurses, not just new grads, in my opinion. New grads definitely need to use it as a solid source for starting their career. In addition to giving tips about what questions to ask during job interviews, there are so many examples from the authors and other nurses that will provide support during the first few months as a nurse. Just reading that others have had the same anxieties, hopes and fears will be a stress buster.

You can't help but want to continue reading the book when you come upon catchy titles like "Let Me Into the Dressing Room, I Want to Try on My New Role." In this section, the authors discuss the reality that even if a new grad had great clinical experiences, she may still feel unprepared for the real world. They include a 12-day journal of a new grad confronting NCLEX, orientations and her first week on the job.

As a veteran nurse, I'm amazed the authors could include so much and such great content into 207 pages. That's a testament to good writing. There were a few things I learned that I never knew before. (I'll keep them to myself.) But the hallmark of this book is the humor injected throughout with concise, relevant content. I know you will find yourself reading some of these experiences and identifying with them immediately. You'll find yourself saying "Right on" to yourself and to the authors and contributing colleagues. ■

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