

RNAO on campus

Students and faculty team up to promote the benefits of RNAO membership, and the value of active involvement.

BY KIMBERLEY KEARSEY

Katherine Gilbert studied for three years in the faculty of science before moving to the collaborative nursing program at Durham College/University of Ontario Institute of Technology (DC/UOIT). The seasoned volunteer and self-professed “sponge” says she didn’t hesitate signing up for RNAO student membership right from the start of classes in 2009. It’s no wonder then that this go-getter left a mark on students and faculty when she graduated this past spring. In fact, her successors may not realize it, but they owe her a debt of gratitude for her efforts to incorporate the cost of RNAO student membership into the school’s ancillary fees. Thanks to Gilbert, they now have access to a range of benefits reserved especially for Ontario’s next generation of RNs.

Rewind three years to a chance meeting between Gilbert and Humber College student Poonam Sharma – who spearheaded a similar effort in her collaborative nursing program – and you’ll understand the inspiration behind the initiative. Gilbert learned of Sharma’s efforts and wanted to take on the project in Durham. “It was just an idea over dinner,” she admits.

“I think belonging to your professional organization prior to beginning your career gives you a more rounded experience,” she says. As for her personal motivation to take on the challenge of getting buy-in from administrators and students: “Becoming a nurse was more of an identity to me. I didn’t want to just focus on the school aspect,” she explains. “I wanted to go out and network and be involved.”

Marianne Cochrane, co-director of the DC/UOIT nursing program at the time, and a board member for RNAO now, says she saw a spark in Gilbert right from the start. That’s why she

invited her to attend the association’s 2010 annual general meeting. As a mature student, she had life experiences that helped her to understand the value of involvement, Cochrane says. She was thrilled when Gilbert got the initiative going at DC/UOIT. Students now pay \$15 and start the year off with a membership package describing everything that’s available to them through their professional association.

It may seem like a simple concept, but the work behind this kind of administrative shift is significant. For Gilbert, it involved visits to a number of classrooms, presentations about the benefits of membership, conversations in the hallway about the opportunities for involvement, and a student referendum.

“I’ve always had so much faculty support and that was basically what gave me the confidence to really push forward,” she says. “Most of our faculty members are active RNAO members, so going into their classrooms and talking about RNAO was never an issue.”

Cochrane’s membership stretches back to the 70s. She has been a member of the board of directors three times, and says she championed the idea because it “doesn’t make sense to me not to belong.” Students are the future, she explains. “I need to know they’ll be there continuing on the work when I’m slowing down. They need to be involved right at the beginning so they can understand the complexity (of nursing) and the opportunities to find their voice and speak out.”

Cochrane says it takes most students until second year to realize what they’re missing by not becoming active RNAO members. She wants to change that, and is harnessing the energy and ideas



Katherine Gilbert (left) and Marianne Cochrane joined forces in 2010 to bring the benefits of RNAO membership to all nursing students at DC/VOIT.

PHOTO: JEFF KIRK

of young people to make it happen: “The more I see in a student, the more I’m willing to give. If they start to soak things up like a sponge, I start to pour more in.”

Gilbert, who is now a registered nurse at Newmarket’s Southlake Regional Health Centre, says going into classrooms and simply saying ‘here’s your membership card’ isn’t enough to empower a new generation. “If you want students to be interested, you need to make them feel they can be involved, and explain how that will benefit them,” she explains. “Being dedicated to your cause is really important, and also modeling that is important. For instance, telling them about experiences I had going to different conferences and being able to represent our school...that got a lot of students interested.”

Including DC/VOIT, there are six Ontario schools offering student membership through tuition/ancillary fees. The others are St. Clair College, Humber College/University of New Brunswick, Queen’s University, Trent University, and the CARE Centre for Internationally Educated Nurses.

“I would like to see every nursing student regard RNAO as part of their education. So much of what the association does in terms of practice and policy is going to affect them when they begin practising,” says Daniel Lau, RNAO’s director of membership and services. “It’s important for them to see the value of their professional body in action early on, and to be part of the process that shapes nursing and health-care policies.”

Kathleen Kerr shares this view. She’s in her third year of nursing at Toronto’s Ryerson

University. She’d love to see this happen in the collaborative program with George Brown and Centennial colleges. It’s complicated, she admits, because there are three sites. But she’s willing to put in the effort.

“First years are always asking why this is important to them now,” she says of her conversations as membership representative for RNAO’s Nursing Students of Ontario (NSO) interest group. “My biggest selling point is the knowledge they’re going to gain.” But she doesn’t pressure anyone to get involved right away. “If you want to be a part of eight interest groups because you’re just interested...that’s totally fine,” she tells colleagues, suggesting they decide later what they want to focus their attention on.

Kerr admits she’s come up against some resistance. Some students argue that membership with the Canadian Nursing Students Association (CNSA) is already included in their tuition, so why include membership with another association? “They’re both competing for that student voice, but I don’t think it should be a competition.” CNSA and NSO are different groups with different mandates, she tells naysayers. “I don’t think people understand we each have our roles and they can be synergistic.”

Synergy and collaboration are at the heart of an initiative of this nature, Gilbert, Cochrane and Kerr agree.

Gilbert says: “This is a way to get students together...increasing their confidence that even though they’re still studying, they do have a voice, and RNAO does listen to that voice.” **RN**

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To find out more about the benefits of student membership, visit www.RNAO.ca/studentbenefits