

Early yearnings return later in life

JUDITH GREENWOOD-SPEERS SAYS HER SWITCH TO NURSING FROM RETAIL WAS THE “BEST DECISION” SHE’S EVER MADE.

WHEN SHE WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL, two of Judith Greenwood-Speers’ friends passed away. One died in a car accident; another died of leukemia. Each loss motivated her to think about becoming a physician. She also toyed with nursing and politics. Growing up with inspirational female leaders such as former Conservative MP Flora MacDonald, elected in the 70s, and Judy LaMarsh, the second woman to serve as a federal cabinet minister in 1963, fuelled the latter interest. “I felt that politicians were reachable, but I had no intention then of becoming one,” says the now former Green Party deputy leader (Ontario chapter), president and inaugural advocate for health and long-term care.

Back then, health care and politics took a back seat to Greenwood-Speers’ other love: business. She discovered her aptitude for retail at the age of 14, when she sold her father’s excess produce on the family’s Wolfe Island farm near Kingston. She graduated from high school and entered a five-year training program with a North American retailer. She worked her way through the ranks, but when a promotion required her to travel just as she began thinking about starting a family, she decided it was time to revisit those early yearnings of health care, and enrolled in nursing at Kitchener’s Conestoga College.

She continued to foster an

interest in politics (her elective was political science), which began at the age of 14. She was barely a teenager when she began doing her own taxes and noticed just how much money was going towards Ontario’s health-care spending. “I was keenly aware that



health care would always be linked to politicians and legislation, so understanding it... was an active goal.”

More than three decades later, Greenwood-Speers says becoming a nurse was “the best decision I’ve ever made.” She worked as a staff RN at Kitchener’s Grand River Hospital for 21 years, then as a nurse supervisor, executive director and director of administration at health centres in Cambridge, Parry Sound and Guelph.

By 1995, her passion for politics and discovery of the link with nursing had led to a great deal of lobbying. She wrote letters to political leaders on topics

such as boosting the number of care hours in nursing homes. Caring for the elderly is her greatest boon, she says. “Helping them to live their best is a real art and science.” That’s why she is vocal when she sees the need for improvement in the system. In fact, she recently

Three things you don’t know about Judith Greenwood-Speers:

1. She helped to form the Kitchener-Waterloo chapter of the Raging Grannies, a social justice and activist organization.
2. She is a Canadian history buff.
3. David Suzuki is the reason she became aware of the Green Party of Ontario’s platform. He was signing books at a Waterloo store when the two started talking politics.

fired off a letter to Health Minister Deb Matthews lamenting the quality of care in long-term care homes and suggesting improvements such as staffing hours and ratio of RNs per patient.

Nurses are “the front-line, and patients count on us because we understand what they are up against in getting their needs met,” she says. “Tommy Douglas’ vision was right, and a lot more (attention) needs to be directed at the social determinants of health to keep health care affordable and people healthy.”

Greenwood-Speers first ran for Waterloo regional council in 1997, when she became

concerned about public health budget constraints. She didn’t gain a seat, but the experience motivated her to stick around politically. She ran for Waterloo city council in 2000 and 2003. And, in 1999 and 2007, was the Green Party candidate for Kitchener-Waterloo. It was during

that time she also assumed the roles of first deputy leader of the party’s Ontario chapter, party president, and inaugural advocate for health and long-term care, a title she held for a decade.

While she enjoyed being a candidate, Greenwood-Speers is now hoping to work behind the scenes to make a difference in public policy. She knows she has a lot to offer as a nurse with over 30 years of experience.

Looking back at that uncertain teenager who

flip-flopped from sales to nursing to politics, Greenwood-Speers, who is wrapping up a project management role in Kingston, admits this is not the career path she expected to follow, but is proud of the work she’s done. Her decision to pursue nursing as a second career is one she’s never regretted. It’s helped her to sharpen her advocacy skills, she says. “Our universal health care is the thorn in the lion’s paw. Understanding how it can be undermined, and how to stop it, is essential.” **RN**

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