

Eulogy for Dr. Vanessa Burkoski

Selfless, authentic, courageous, brilliant, and yes, funny too!

Dr. Doris Grinspun

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Dear family and friends, I am honoured that Ontario's nurse leader -- Dr. Vanessa Burkoski – asked me to do her eulogy. The iconic Dr. Vanessa Burkoski is for Norm his beloved spouse, for Leo and young Vanessa their adored mom, and for Ms. Roma her cherished daughter. For the rest of the family, Vanessa is simply Vanessa: spouse, mother, stepmother, daughter, sister, sister in-law, aunt, grandmother, and so much more. For me, as for Mary and Jennifer – Vanessa is our best friend. And, for our V team – honour guard today (led by RNAO's president Dr. Claudette Holloway) and watching livestream from Italy, Calgary, Vancouver and all over Ontario – V was a mentor and will forever remain an inspiration. We are all heartbroken.

I kept thinking during the last two years that the time will come that I will have to let Vanessa go. But I simply refused. In my heart, I felt – like you all did – “she can't go” – because life will never be the same without our Vanessa.

It is always fulfilling to spend good times with someone as beautiful as Vanessa, and we will all cherish those memories. Those of us who had the privilege of spending time with our V during her battle against advanced cancer also witnessed her authenticity, selflessness and gigantic courage till the very end. And, we will always be in awe of her strength of character.

Vanessa was so appreciative and so thankful for every day she got with all of us. And she was generous in sharing with friends glimpses of her heart's pain and her fears of leaving this world, as we know it. Not long ago she texted me “My dear friend, I had a lovely day with family and have been enjoying the beautiful sunshine on my deck. I must admit that I have some days where I am scared and depressed, but I do not let these passing moments overwhelm me. I refocus on the beautiful life that I had and have right now. ❤️❤️”

Her authenticity and courage were in full display until the very end. Vanessa was in a league of her own. She was the most selfless person I have ever met. Her humanity and caring for others – especially those close to her – transcended what most would consider normal.

There were also funny sides to our selfless Vanessa. Although she claimed to be an introvert and tried to shy away from big exposure, she once made a mistake. We were talking about her love for shoes, she tried mine on, and noted that we have the same shoe size (hint hint). So, in a trip to Colombia I found the perfect pair of fancy salmon-pink high-heeled shoes (yup, fancy of course). I thought: what better time to give them to her than RNAO's annual general meeting, as she ended her RNAO president role, in front of 400-plus people!

In the middle of the festive banquet, Vanessa agreed to put on the new shoes to set off the look of her beautiful black dress. We made her sit in a chair in the middle of the dance floor. With the band playing, Norm fitted the new beautiful shoes to Vanessa. Just picture Prince Charming and Cinderella, but surrounded by the cheers and laughter of hundreds of people.

That was Vanessa: shining, selfless and funny. And she did indeed have her own real-life Prince Charming – his name is Norm!

I remember, Norm, the days when Vanessa was working in Toronto. Thursdays couldn't come soon enough so she could go back home and be with you. Vanessa always wanted to spend more time with you, and with the family. Norm, please know that every single trip you and Vanessa took together between each course of chemo added life to her life. She shared with me that it made her forget she was terminally ill. Only a very special person can give this level of comfort. Norm, thank you for taking care of our Vanessa.

Leo and young Vanessa (or Vanessita as I prefer to call you) – your mom spoke so often about you. She said you were the smartest and kindest ever.

Leo, I know you were there all the time for your mom, and you've been a rock-solid support for Norm. And, I also know that you and beautiful Sarah – who helped nurse Vanessa and who Vanessa also adored – will continue to lift Norm up.

Vanessita, your mom was so immensely proud that you became a nurse. And you gave your mom the gift of being **her** nurse in her time of need. I know how much this means and also how difficult it is, because I too nursed my own mother when she was terminally ill with cancer. Please know that I, like Jennifer, will keep a close eye on you and lift you up at times of need.

Mom Roma, Vanessa cherished you. What can one possibly say to a mother who lost a daughter? There is absolutely nothing that can console – the pain must be unmeasurable. Mom Roma, I hope it brings you some comfort to think about how much good and love Vanessa is leaving behind. She has touched literally thousands of lives, for the better. This is a gift that you, Mom Roma, nurtured and gave to humanity. THANK YOU for bringing Vanessa to us all.

Vanessa continuously spoke about her family, about many of those present here or joining us by livestream. I wish for you all that you continue to be there for one another, as you are today.

Vanessa also spoke about her friends. Mary Brannagan – you worked with Vanessa decades ago at the community health centre and were the matchmaker for the beautiful couple of 23 years, Norm and Vanessa. Jennifer Yoon – you were always at Vanessa’s side, wherever she went to work, you went along with her. It is powerful to see how you are flourishing as a nurse leader, carrying on Vanessa’s legacy and your own.

I cannot talk about Vanessa without talking about nursing. Vanessa not only loved nursing, she **lived** nursing. In May of this year, Vanessa sat down with RNAO to talk about her extraordinary nursing career in a video which I invite you to watch in RNAO’s obituary at RNAO.ca. When I sent this video to Vanessa for her approval, she texted me back saying: “My son Leo watched the video and said to me "it's like Mozart talking about music" -- LOL I guess he knows how much I love nursing ❤️”.

Vanessa decided to become a nurse at age 14. Her grandmother had been hospitalized, and Vanessa had been watching the nurses’ work. Vanessa quickly recognized that nurses make a difference. This seed grew into a conviction that the knowledge, skills and experience that nurses bring are weaved into a beautiful tapestry. This tapestry is a strong enduring fabric.

Combined with healthy public policy, it supports and protects people, families and communities through the best and the worst times in their lives.

These are the ideas that guided our Vanessa through all her many studies and roles, including chief nursing officer of Ontario and six years of service on the RNAO board, including as president. These are the values that led her to speak out publicly about patient safety at a major hospital at which she had an executive role almost a decade ago. I can't express what immense courage this took. She risked – and lost her job as a result, but kept her integrity.

Vanessa was no shrinking violet, and nobody's fool. Her family, her friends and the nursing community had her back, and she went on to new and exciting challenges at Humber River Hospital. Vanessa had zero patience for unimportant things. "Let's not focus on the minutiae" was one of her mantras at RNAO board meetings. Her laser-like focus always remained on what counted – how to best benefit patients, families and communities.

I'm not sure whether Vanessa's family knows just how deeply her many RNAO colleagues cared for her. So many of you here today and joining us on livestream have supported our V through inspiring messages – please know, she cherished every one intensely.

A bittersweet moment towards the end of her life was receiving the Order of Ontario, the province's highest award. In June, Lieutenant-Governor Elizabeth Dowdeswell travelled to Vanessa and Norm's home in Amherstburg to present the insignia to her – a memorable and emotional event.

Family and friends, let's cherish Vanessa's fulsome life. She has brought us all together, into one big family, caring for all of us with respect and deep love. Let's take this legacy forward and then Vanessa will always be with us in our hearts, thoughts and actions.

Rest in peace, my dear friend V.

Rest in peace, Vanessa.

Rest in peace, Dr. Vanessa Burkoski.