

ADVANCE FOR NURSES

Mentoring Minorities

Wallena Gould leads the way for CRNAs; her efforts have earned her recognition.

By Judy Baca

Wallena Gould, MSN, CRNA, may have started out as an accountant, but her nursing credentials are the thing that is leading her to live her dream.

A resident of Mickleton, NJ, the 47-year-old is a full-time nurse anesthetist working at both the South Jersey Healthcare System in Vineland, in the operating room, and at Mainline Endoscopy Center in Bala Cynwyd, PA, in the procedure room.

But what she is most proud of is her role as founder of the Diversity in Nurse Anesthesia Mentorship Program.



Gould was a single mother on welfare, raising a 5½ year-old son, when she received her undergraduate accounting degree from Farleigh Dickinson University, Teaneck, NJ, and landed a coveted position with Ernst & Young accounting firm, Park Avenue, New York City. However, she explains, it wasn't long before she realized she "wasn't happy in the corporate world" and wanted to be a nurse.

Discovering Her Calling

She began studying at Gloucester County College, Sewell, NJ, to obtain her associate degree in nursing and was working as an OR nurse when she was introduced to nurse anesthesia. Then, armed with her associate degree in nursing and BS in accounting, Gould was able to enroll in La Salle University's RN-MSN program. She received her MSN and CRNA in 2004.

Gould says she had only begun at LaSalle when she noticed "right away there was a lack of minority students" in the specialized nursing curriculum. "We shared the nurse anesthesia curriculum with the University of Pennsylvania, Villanova University, St. Joseph's University and Drexel University," she recalled, "and all of the CRNA instructors were Caucasian. So I went to the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists (AANA) and requested statistics. I found something was missing; something was wrong with the numbers I received. At that time, of an aggregate of 36,000 CRNAs, only 6 percent came from a minority population."

Time for Action

Gould took the opportunity to focus an assigned poster project on those statistics combined with photos of her fellow classmates in action. But she didn't stop there. When she witnessed the failure of one minority student in the shared curriculum, she says, "I didn't want to see that again."

Still a student herself, she went to work and modeled a luncheon on those given by other nursing programs to introduce the nurse anesthesia program to potential nursing students.

She sat down with the new students for lunch, set up a session to inform them of the career opportunity and took them to the lab to show them equipment used by nurse anesthetists

"My original intention was to reach out to the next class coming in to La Salle," she said. "I knew there were five new minority students coming in and that they probably didn't even know about the true rigors of the program."

It wasn't long before word of her outreach spread to other universities in the Philadelphia area, then to Connecticut, Maryland and New York's Columbia University.

With that encouragement, in addition to the support of her husband, son and two daughters, Gould founded the non-profit Diversity in Nurse Anesthesia Mentorship Program.

Volunteers for Diversity

The all-volunteer organization participants are CRNAs, student CRNAs, critical care nurses and nursing students. Minority CRNAs volunteer their own time to attend career days at urban junior and senior high schools to advise and mentor students. Volunteers also provide annual information sessions/luncheon programs, anesthesia airway workshops, sponsorships for minority nurse anesthesia students to the annual AANA conference, visit members of Historically Black Colleges and Universities and provide an annual graduating celebratory dinner for minority students completing nurse anesthesia programs. The program mentored more than 2,000 nurses in the past 6 years

Recognizing her Work

Gould's work in this endeavor was recognized recently when she was selected for the 2009 Cherokee Inspired Comfort Award, Top National Winner, Advanced Practice Nurse.

Her commitment to her efforts is evident in her comment about the award. She was excited because: "That provided a lot of exposure to other nurses who don't know about the program; so they got in touch with me and that was wonderful."

Two years ago, Gould set up the <http://www.diversistycrna.org/> website to help spread the word. She spends most evenings and weekends working on the site and doing what she loves to do - communicating with potential students and graduates of the mentorship program. She is also now enrolled in the doctorate in education program at Wilmington University.

"Eventually," she declares, "I would like to take over the mentorship program full time. That is what I really love doing."

Judy Baca is a freelance writer and frequent contributor to *ADVANCE*.

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