

Barbara McGarey '79

2024 Distinguished Alumni Acceptance Speech

Thank you, Claire, thank you members of the Alumni Association Board, and hello to all my fellow alumni.

I am deeply honored to accept this award, especially coming from you, my Cornell colleagues.

It's so great to be in the company of so many who have given so much time, energy, and talent to helping patients enjoy longer, healthier lives. I'm proud to be among you for your dedication to nursing, to patients, and to the health of the Nation. You have surely made a difference.

No doubt, there are many of you who continue to deliver nursing care, as you have since we graduated. As for me, I retired from public service one year ago. My final two years were with the Biden administration working on the COVID-19 pandemic response. As I look back on my career, receiving this award is a deeply meaningful and appreciated capstone of 40-plus years with the federal government. I am so grateful to be honored with this distinction.

As Claire, I am a nurse-attorney; following graduation, I worked as a hospital staff nurse at the National Institutes of Health Clinical

Center. Then, I attended law school, passed the bar, and began working as an attorney in public health law.

From time to time, people asked me why I “left” nursing. That question was always jarring to me.

I never felt that I “left” nursing. It is true that I left my job as a bedside nurse, but I have always identified as a nurse, both personally and throughout my career. My nursing education, training, and experience formed the bedrock for my legal career.

So, I transitioned into public health and the law, but I never ‘left’ nursing and nursing never left me. As a legal advisor for the National Institutes of Health (NIH), I was involved with hospital care and clinical research on a daily basis. Whether advising nurses on difficult admissions or ethical questions, advising surgeons with urgent legal questions in the OR, or ensuring the protection of human subjects in clinical research, I never strayed from the principles of nursing that I first learned at Cornell.

It never seemed like a leap to me to do graduate training in law. Nurses and lawyers have much in common. Both are fierce advocates, both are educators, and both are trusted advisors. As a nurse-attorney specializing in public health, I used and built upon the knowledge, skills and experiences I gained from nursing, which were invaluable.

Although I spent most of my career leading the legal department of the NIH, I want to take a few minutes to tell you about my work with the COVID-19 response team for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). This work consumed the last two years of my career, where I was Deputy General Counsel at HHS. And, I do mean “consumed!” In the winter of 2021, I began my tenure as a political appointee in the Biden Administration, just as the first vaccine was being administered to nurses, doctors, and other first responders.

The public health enterprise relies on the ability to deliver vital health information – to educate and inform our population about health risks, prevention strategies, and treatment options. The messengers must be trusted sources – traditionally nurses, doctors, other health care professionals, State public health leaders, and Federal public health officials, such as those at the CDC and the NIH.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged this time-honored system in many ways. Mis-information about the virus – as well as calculated dis-information, contributed to skepticism and significant vaccine hesitancy. Perhaps the fact that the vaccine was developed in record time also contributed to some mistrust (although, what a scientific and medical achievement the mRNA technology is!)

My colleagues and I on the HHS COVID-19 response team spent countless hours (and some sleepless nights) developing and implementing measures to deliver “shots in arms,” as we were fond of saying. The federal government owned all of the vaccine, because the government contracted with pharma and biotech companies to produce it for us. This financially derisked the vaccine development process for the companies and greatly sped delivery of doses to the U.S. public and later, to much of the world as well.

Throughout 2021, our COVID-19 team developed agreements with states and large pharmacy chains to deliver and administer vaccines. The number and breadth of these agreements ensured that – for a country that spans nearly 4 million square miles – the COVID-19 vaccine was available within 5 miles of anyone in the U.S. who wanted it, free of charge.

We used the same approach with all of the subsequent COVID-19 boosters, as well as SARS CoV2 test kits, the COVID anti-viral Paxlovid, and the monoclonal antibodies used to treat COVID-19 patients.

But doses were not enough. Messaging also was vital. To deliver essential public health information, we also developed programs designed to boost the effectiveness of trusted public health messengers, and programs to identify additional trusted

messengers, for example, within church groups, professional sports, neighborhood service providers, and even local barbershops.

The effort was very successful -- the government distributed just shy of one billion COVID-19 vaccine doses, of which, nearly 680 million were administered. That's an unprecedented number of shots in arms during a pandemic outbreak. And although COVID-19 will unfortunately be with us forever, in May of 2023 the President's public health emergency declaration ended. That change meant that the vaccines, treatments, other tools for battling COVID-19 transitioned to the private sector, to be obtained and financed through insurance, safety net hospitals and clinics, and other traditional means.

However, for those two years, our public health system modeled a novel approach for accelerating vaccine development and delivering those vaccines to our Nation, without regard to location or ability to pay. Hopefully we can collectively apply the lessons learned to future contexts.

CU-NYHSN prepared me well for my career in public health, and especially for the complex, multidisciplinary effort to help our country respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I will always be thankful for the opportunity to study at Cornell, and for sharing a remarkable journey with so many outstanding

colleagues. I am proud to be a member of the final CU-NYHSN graduating class of 1979. Like some of you, I still remember the protest T-shirts we wore under our graduation gowns that decried the closing of our school, with the slogan “From Distinction to Extinction.”

There are many heartfelt words I could use to describe the countless hours of care that our class, and the Cornell nursing classes that graduated before us, delivered to patients in need. “Extinction” certainly is not among them.

Thank you for honoring me today and best wishes to all of you and your families.