

Confronting COVID

A story of adaptability, compassion and determination from the Hahn School of Nursing and Health Science's faculty and students during an unprecedented time.

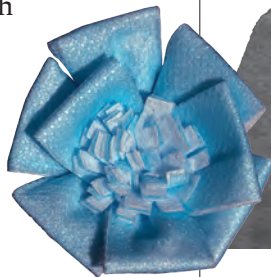
By Ben Peterson

The vision statement for the University of San Diego is both ambitious and straightforward: *Strengthened by the Catholic intellectual tradition, we confront humanity's challenges by fostering peace, working for justice and leading with love.* That shared commitment to confronting humanity's challenges would take on new meaning in the early months of 2020.

As the world faced an unprecedented global health crisis, USD's Hahn school of nursing and Health Science found itself at a critical crossroads. With hospitals filling to capacity and health care workers facing unimaginable challenges, the demand for skilled nurses surged. While many nursing programs across the country paused operations, the school made the bold decision to remain operational, ensuring that its students could continue their education and join the front lines of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

This commitment to education and service did not come without sacrifices. Faculty members worked tirelessly to adapt curricula to meet rapidly evolving state and county guidelines, all while providing unwavering support to students who were thrust into high-pressure clinical environments. Students, many of whom had only just begun their nursing journeys, found themselves navigating uncharted waters, balancing rigorous coursework with the emotional toll of providing care during a pandemic.

Five years later, the impact of that decision is evident in the remarkable stories of the faculty members who led with resilience and the students who answered the call to serve. The school of nursing not only weathered the storm but also emerged stronger, shaping a new generation of nurse leaders whose experiences during the pandemic continue to influence their work today.



JANE GEORGES PhD, RN

Dean

Jane Georges led the school of nursing through the COVID-19 pandemic with a commitment to adaptability, community service and student support. She oversaw the rapid transition to remote learning within days, ensured students maintained clinical placements and prioritized underserved populations through vaccine distribution. Georges' leadership was rooted in a deep understanding of public health, ethical care and the importance of community engagement.

ON ADAPTABILITY: "What I appreciated most about our faculty members was their flexibility and their unselfishness. Within three days, we had turned every in-person course in the school into a remote course."

A MEMORY THAT ENDURES: "I will never forget attending the Scripps Mercy Ball in early March of 2020, hearing a physician describe a mysterious infection in Italy that turned lungs into 'concrete bricks' and realizing in that moment that our world was about to change drastically."

WORDS OF WISDOM: "Nurses are the ones who fill in the gaps in human suffering. It's not just about individual care; it's about making sure people have access to food, housing and vaccines, especially in times of crisis."

LOOKING FORWARD: "I would like to see a more diverse group of nurse leaders emerge, leaders who are more representative of all Americans. My hope — with our plans for new hybrid and remote programs — is that we continue to innovate in nursing education, offering accessible graduate programs to nurses across the state."



KATHY MARSH RN, BSN, MSN, PhD
Associate Dean

Kathy Marsh '86 (BSN), '90 (MSN), '14 (PhD), a triple USD alumna, played a critical role in leading the nursing school's response to the pandemic. She managed the procurement of personal protective equipment secured vaccine access for the entire university and worked tirelessly to keep students in clinical settings. In addition to her role as point person for all Southern California nursing programs to the governor's office, Marsh helped to ensure that USD's nursing students continued their education uninterrupted.

ON ADAPTABILITY: "We revised the curriculum eight times during the pandemic. Every day brought new challenges, and we constantly had to adjust. It was crisis management at its core — planning for scenarios that changed by the hour and making sure students were ready for whatever came next."

A MEMORY THAT ENDURES: "Securing vaccines for the university. We planned every detail, down to how many steps each person would take in the clinic to avoid contamination. Watching our students administer vaccines with such confidence was unforgettable."

LOOKING FORWARD: "I hope we continue to teach our students resilience and adaptability. The pandemic proved how vital nurses are, and my hope is that future nurses carry that pride and commitment into every aspect of their careers."



LYN PUHEK NP, APRN, CNS, PHN
MEPN Program Coordinator

Lyn Puhek led the school's clinical education efforts during the pandemic with transparency, creativity and a strong commitment to student safety. She managed constant curriculum adjustments, maintained open communication through biweekly meetings with faculty and bimonthly meetings with students, and ensured that hands-on training continued through simulation labs when hospital access was limited. Her leadership helped keep students engaged, informed and prepared, despite the unprecedented challenges.

ON ADAPTABILITY: "The only thing you can bet on is change. We had to be flexible — we went in to work, got the university and hospital updates, never knowing what our day would bring. During COVID, that flexibility meant revising the curriculum over and over and finding new ways to support students when everything was uncertain."

A MEMORY THAT ENDURES: "The parents of our graduates thanking us at the pinning ceremony, saying, 'Thank you for not giving up on them.' That meant everything to me."

LOOKING FORWARD: "I hope these nurses carry forward the lessons of resilience, teamwork and adaptability. We made it through this, and I know they'll face future challenges with the same strength and compassion."



DAVID HAIGH MSN, RN
Director of Simulation and Innovative Learning

David Haigh led the transformation of the Dickinson Nursing Simulation Center during the pandemic, ensuring that students could complete critical clinical hours despite restrictions. He oversaw a rapid overhaul of procedures — from managing smaller, rotating student cohorts to implementing rigorous cleaning protocols, all while maintaining the training program's high standard of hands-on training.

ON ADAPTABILITY: "COVID changed everything. We had to rethink every simulation — how we set it up, ran it and tore it down. It taught us to be nimble and ready to change on short notice, and now we have a playbook for future challenges."

A MEMORY THAT ENDURES: "I'll never forget those first few simulation events during the pandemic — behind the scenes, it was chaos, but we put on a calm face for the students. Their gratitude made all the stress worth it."

LOOKING FORWARD:

"I hope we continue to innovate with technology like virtual reality and AI, giving students more tools to learn anytime, anywhere, and preparing them even better for real-world care."





KRYSTAL NEAG RN, MSN

*Rapid Response Nurse, Scripps Memorial Hospital
Clinical Instructor for the Hahn School of Nursing
and Health Science*

When Krystal Neag '21 (MSN) was considering nursing schools, the warm welcome she received when she visited the Hahn School of Nursing and Health Science for admissions interviews sealed the deal. That sense of belonging proved to be especially valuable when COVID arrived after her first semester. Neag leaned on her cohort to navigate virtual learning, reduced clinical hours and her role as a patient care assistant during the height of the crisis. Now, as a clinical instructor at her alma mater, she mentors new nursing students, bringing her pandemic experience full circle.

ON ADAPTABILITY: "The COVID experience definitely helped me be a more adaptable nurse. I was put in situations where I had to learn very quickly, and I found that I had the resilience and perseverance to make it through."

A MEMORY THAT ENDURES: "We had a really good, close group of students. We would have meet-ups, and a lot of us ended up becoming PCAs during the time of COVID. We all wanted to seek out extra opportunities to help. I'm not sure how I would have done it without them, and I'm still friends with a lot of them today."

LOOKING FORWARD: "Coming back to teach has reminded me why I became a nurse. I hope to give as much to these new students as USD gave to me."



DANE JENSEN RN, MSN

ER Nurse at Scripps Memorial Hospital La Jolla

Dane Jensen '20 (MSN) thought he might follow in his father's footsteps and join the fire service, but nursing came calling loud and clear. During an undergraduate study abroad program in Australia, one of his classmates became ill and was hospitalized. Observing the nurses who cared for his friend sparked his interest in a new career path. Everything was going according to plan for the start of his MSN program, but his final year at the Hahn School of Nursing and Health Science was marked by anxiety, uncertainty and a sink-or-swim reality when he graduated and joined the fight against the virus.

ON ADAPTABILITY: "[My final year] definitely made me more resilient. And now, being in the ER, just being able to roll with the punches and kind of take things as they come, you do what you have to do."

A MEMORY THAT ENDURES: "I remember getting that email [from the nursing school] while we were in lockdown, and being pretty ecstatic that: one, we were going to graduate; and then two, we were going to be able to help during the crisis."

LOOKING FORWARD: "Nursing is a difficult job that is only getting more challenging with the current political climate and an aging population. New grads must be as prepared as possible for the challenges they will face upon entering the hospital for the first time."



ANN LAWANI PhD, MSN, RN

*Statewide ME-MSN Program Director,
University of San Francisco School of Nursing
and Health Professions / Clinical Nurse, John
Muir Health*

Ann Lawani '18 (MSN), '22 (PhD) recalls that when her brother was succumbing to cardiomyopathy in 2014, she was thousands of miles away. The memories her mother shared afterward centered around the nurses who cared for him. It was then that Lawani knew what she wanted to be. After earning her MSN from the Hahn School of Nursing and Health Science in 2018, she was recruited to join the PhD program by founding faculty member Dr. Patricia Roth. Today, Lawani uses her pandemic experiences to teach the next generation of nurses about adaptability, teamwork and compassionate care.

ON ADAPTABILITY: "COVID taught me that you can't cap what your best is. You learn something new every day, so your best today has to be better than your best was yesterday."

A MEMORY THAT ENDURES: "There were times we were so short-staffed, and everyone across the board was being utilized. But we all covered for each other, and I knew that we would find a way through."

LOOKING FORWARD: "The pandemic opened our eyes to inequities and disparities that exist in the health care system. My hope is that we can continue trying to fill those gaps and provide more equitable care."



MAI TRUONG RN, MSN

Education and Professional Development Manager, Rady Children's Hospital

Mai Truong '21 (MSN) was positioned to take over a leadership role, and she was encouraged to pursue a Master of Science in nursing as part of the succession plan. With creative, flexible support offered by the nursing school, Truong completed her studies during the COVID-19 pandemic while raising her preteen daughter and two-year-old twin sons. Now overseeing education and professional development at Rady Children's Hospital, Truong applies her pandemic experiences to improve patient care, staff support and operational efficiency.

ON ADAPTABILITY: "Balancing work, school and my kids during a pandemic taught me that flexibility and perseverance are key. I had to study in hospital rooms, at friends' houses late at night — anywhere I could find peace."

A MEMORY THAT ENDURES: "I'll never forget sitting in an empty library on campus during lockdown, wiping down every surface with Clorox before and after studying, just grateful for a quiet space to focus."

LOOKING FORWARD: "I manage education at Rady Children's, and we're changing how we work with new nurses who graduated after COVID. They missed out on so much. We're putting them through our own rigorous training to make sure they have the clinical skills and soft skills needed to care for patients going forward."



RICHARD LEUNG RN, MSN

Progressive Care Unit Nurse, John Muir Health

Richard Leung '22 (MSN) made the switch from tech recruiter to nursing student, partly inspired by his desire to care for his mother, who was chronically ill with lung disease. His interest in helping his family and others was further reinforced when COVID arrived. Although he was offered the opportunity to defer his enrollment, he felt even more motivated to complete his education as soon as possible to start helping his community. Leung now works in the Progressive Care Unit at John Muir Health, applying lessons he learned during the pandemic to better serve his patients.

ON ADAPTABILITY: "The COVID experience taught me all about being flexible and being strong but also about letting go of control. When you start working, you realize that sometimes you just can't be in control of things and you have to keep going."

A MEMORY THAT ENDURES: "When we started to give vaccines in San Diego, especially for very vulnerable communities. I will never forget that — being at the forefront of curbing the pandemic."

LOOKING FORWARD: "Nursing is growing and changing daily with new best practices, tools and roles. I'm confident that the Hahn School of Nursing and Health Science will adapt to prepare students with the most up-to-date learning experience. I'm excited for future graduates to join us in the workforce — we'll need all the help we can get!"



ERIN KEATING RN, CNL, PHN, MSN

Neonatal Intensive Care Nurse, Advocate Children's Hospital

Erin Keating '23 (MSN) worked in global health for several years, completing fellowships in East Africa — one in a rural health organization and one at a large, urban surgical center. Both experiences showed her that nurses are the backbone of health systems, inspiring her to pursue the profession. At USD, she emerged as a leader and was elected president of the Graduate Nursing Student Association. Now a NICU nurse in Chicago, Keating credits USD for fostering adaptability and collaboration.

ON ADAPTABILITY: "Students think that learning pathophysiology, pharmacology and clinical skills are the things we need to take out of nursing school. Those things matter, but being able to go with the flow is what will help you be most successful."

A MEMORY THAT ENDURES: "Our pinning ceremony at Founders Chapel was the best day. We had a wonderful Mass, and then a nice reception where classmates gave speeches, met each other's families and celebrated the accomplishment of graduation."

LOOKING FORWARD: "I still talk to friends from nursing school every few days. It's important to have that network of students, where you can study together, learn together, cry together and support each other — even into your professional careers. I will continue relying on those relationships."

The Hahn School of Nursing and Health Science

DURING THE PANDEMIC

In reflecting on how the school of nursing navigated its pandemic journey, one thing becomes clear: resilience, adaptability and compassion defined every step. The stories of both the leaders who guided the program and the learners who stepped up in unprecedented times serve as powerful reminders of what it takes to be a nurse.

How the school of nursing responded during the pandemic was not just about meeting the moment, it was also about setting a standard for the future and a powerful example of how USD lives its vision to confront humanity's challenges.

8

*Curriculum adjustments
to adapt to evolving health
care challenges*

3

*On-campus vaccination
events to support public
health efforts*

101

*In-house N95 respirator fit
tests conducted to ensure
safety and compliance*

1,219

*degrees awarded from May 2020
to December 2022*

2

*special commencement ceremonies
held in 2021, including a dedicated
celebration for the Class of 2020*

"Nursing is about solving problems under pressure. We had to find creative solutions every day, and that mindset is what every nurse needs to thrive." — David Haigh