

Values in Action – Dignity
Janet Hildebrand, RN, FNP

“My passion is care for the poor” says Nurse Practitioner Janet Hildebrand, RN, FNP, who was born in Ecuador and raised by working poor parents in South Central Los Angeles. She has not forgotten how as a child she would take the bus with her mother to go to medical clinics at USC and UCLA, where she would translate.

She relates, “My patients can be very challenging, but they remind me of my own family. I am a product of my family, and they always stressed helping those who have less.”

Janet’s deeply ingrained belief in the worthiness of her fellow human beings led her to become a public health nurse for the first five years of her career. In 1987 Janet came to work in the mobile clinic at St. Jude Medical Center. To be closer to home and family, she transitioned to working for St. Joseph Hospital’s Puente a la Salud Mobile Community Clinics in 2006.

Respect for the dignity of her medically underserved patients comes naturally to Janet, who considers herself a “community health nurse at heart.” According to Janet, receiving the St. Joseph Hospital Values in Action Award for Dignity has served to make her even more sensitive to the value of Dignity.

She shares, “I see the face of God in every person. When I see an especially tough situation in the back of my mind I’m thinking, “There but for the grace of God go I.”

Uses open, honest and respectful communication during all interactions.

In Janet’s world, two out of five patients have a diagnosis of diabetes, and two more are pre-diabetic. Even those who have good weight and lab results almost always have a family history of diabetes.

“Their conditions aren’t cured, but they can learn to control them,” Janet emphasizes. “They learn this will be a battle for the rest of their lives. We protect them and help assure a healthy future by keeping track of their health....I tell them what we’re doing is not for today, it’s for 10 years from now, to prevent blindness, kidney and heart disease. We’re not telling them what to do or scolding them, but instead showing them what’s possible, and providing lots of positive reinforcement.”

Rosa Robledo, LVN, who nominated Janet, states, “We keep Janet very busy. She sees from 21 to 24 patients per day twice weekly. Janet always treats our patients and staff with dignity and respect. Even on her busiest day she will not turn away a walk-in patient. Janet treats patients as individuals, respecting their viewpoints and using every interaction as an opportunity to improve the overall well being of our patients. She uses open and honest communication ... Many times on her day off she will call me and ask me to call a patient to follow-up on his or her condition and report back to her. She really cares about our patients, who come from very poor communities, are uninsured and most have very little education. Janet goes the extra mile to make sure our patients receive the highest quality of care that St. Joseph Hospital is known for.”

Listens to, acknowledges and shows respect for all people with their differing viewpoints and ways of interpreting the world.

Janet’s approach to patients is to listen and put herself in their shoes. “I don’t want to push something on them they won’t accept. If I did, I wouldn’t see them again – they wouldn’t come back,” she claims.

Oftentimes patients come in worried about concerns other than their physical health. “I want to control their blood pressure or their diabetes, but they’re worried about a son who is getting bad grades and hanging out with the wrong crowd. First I try to address their concerns or offer suggestions about resources available to them, and if they share my faith I sometimes pray with them. Then I can turn the focus back to them. I tell them it’s important to be healthy so they can take good care of their child.”

Rapport with patients is essential to Janet, who promotes a family atmosphere. “I tell everyone that not only is the patient our concern; it’s the whole family. When a father is diagnosed with diabetes, for example, the whole family is affected. We teach his wife how to make healthy changes in nutrition, because the children are also at risk of diabetes.”

One of Janet’s patients is a woman from the Seventh Day Adventist church. “She always brings me literature (about the faith), and even though I’m Catholic I just take it. During her visit I’ll browse through it to acknowledge her beliefs and build a rapport based on our commonalities.”

Creates and promotes positive working relationships that foster a healthy and effective work environment.

Janet shares tragedies from her own life to foster health and hope for her patients. “I walked with my brother, who died of colon cancer at age 52,” she shares. “I did a lot of research into the disease, and I gave him a token of St. Peregrine, the patron saint for those afflicted with cancer, which gave us strength. One of our patients had stage IV colon cancer. After learning that she was Catholic I bought her a St. Peregrine token to give her strength and comfort. I saw her husband after that and asked about her. He told me, ‘She really appreciates the saint you gave her. She holds it every day, and she’s doing well.’ I was pleased to hear that she was doing well spiritually because that’s very important for healing.”

Janet’s days in the mobile clinic, usually working alongside three to four other staff members, are filled with laughter. “I recently told a staff member, ‘You’ve got to laugh or you cry.’ When we have bad days we lift each other up, and we’re cross-trained to help each other. We’re very comfortable with each other and don’t take offense easily. For example, some of my patients talk a lot, and a staff member will say to me, ‘chop chop!’ I also try to always bring coffee and goodies, because sometimes it’s the small things that are important.”

Recognizes and celebrates the unique contributions of all co-workers.

Janet has a deep appreciation for the way clinic staff members emphasize prevention and education. In talking about her team, Janet states, “Many patients are pleasantly surprised that all our team members speak Spanish. There is a difference between translating and speaking directly to the patient.”

Janet describes her work as an outreach of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange and a “perfect fit.” She adds, “This is such an amazing program, and there is such a need for it in the community.”

Because she understands the importance of funding the work begun by the Sisters and carried out through Puente, Janet willingly supports the work of her SJO co-workers in the Foundation. Last year she shared her life’s work with Foundation members and community leaders at a “Dollars for Diabetes: Care for the Poor” event. Also in support of resource development to ensure Puente can continue to serve the patients that Janet has so much compassion for, she delivered an informative and highly inspiration presentation on Puente’s

services to our hospital's community benefit committee and another very compelling presentation to the Board of Directors of The California Wellness Foundation.

Summary

The Dignity that Janet models and imparts goes well beyond her job and into the community. She volunteers at the charter school El Sol in Santa Ana, providing partial physicals for parents who are often non-funded, identifying problems and connecting them to community resources. She serves as team mom for her 16-year-old son's baseball team at Mater Dei High School. For the past eight years she has served as a Eucharistic minister at her church, St. John the Baptist. In her role as a part-time nursing instructor at CSU Dominguez Hills, she sees to it that her students are sensitive to the needs in the community and resources available to them.

Along with a tender and respectful regard for her patients, Janet exudes Dignity in her personal life, perhaps never more so than when faced with tragedy. Two years ago she lost her mother, who was the victim of a home invasion. The perpetrators are still at large.

“Such an experience can either ruin you or make you stronger,” shares Janet. “One of the first things that I did was go to church and pray. I can't find room to hate – that would bring me down to their level. I pray that they will come to realize what they have done and that they will pray for forgiveness. It's not for me to judge them. I try to follow the example of Jesus, who even forgave those who hung him on the cross. I've come to realize that forgiveness is an important aspect of Dignity.”