

# UWG | Tanner Health System School of Nursing

## Newsletter

Fall 2021

Volume 5

Issue 1



### Notes from Dean Jenny Schuessler

Happy Holidays from the  
School of Nursing!

Nurses and nursing continue to be on the front lines and in the front pages as society grapples with a global pandemic and we continue to demonstrate why we are designated a 2019-2023 Center of Excellence by the National League for Nursing! In addition to teaching, learning, clinical practice, and caring for patients during this pandemic, the faculty, staff, and students of the School of Nursing have been active in getting COVID-19 vaccines in arms. In fact, we have contributed to clinics administering more than 20,700 vaccines this spring and summer.

Demonstrating our commitment to address the

nursing shortage, we enrolled, yet again, the largest cohort ever in summer 2021 to the pre-licensure BSN program. In fact, since 2014, we have increased the size of our admission cohorts by 58%. Our RN to BSN program is a strong, student-friendly program designed to facilitate the RN with an associate's degree to complete the BSN in a timely manner. Our graduate programs have strong nurse educator tracks, critical to address the nurse educator shortage, in both our MSN and EdD programs. In addition to our nurse educator options, our MSN leader/manager and clinical nurse leader tracks are imperative to the nursing work force, as healthcare systems are seeking leaders for this unprecedented time in nursing and healthcare.

As we are coming to the close of 2021 - the 2nd consecutive Year of the Nurse - it is only fitting that the National Academies of Sciences and Engineering and the National Academy of Medicine published the land-mark report, The Future of Nursing 2020-2030: Charting a Path to Achieve Health Equity. As stated in this report, "Nurses live and work

at the intersection of health, education, and communities in a wide array of settings and practice....A nation cannot fully thrive until everyone - no matter who they are, where they live, or how much money they make - can live their healthiest live style possible". The challenges facing our profession over the next decade are immense, however our extraordinary students, alumni, faculty, and staff are up to the task. In this newsletter, you will read about some of them. We are also proud to share this year's recognitions received by the SON. We welcome your feedback by completing our [Community of Advisor's Survey](#). This link will be open through December 10.

And finally, as we grow our programs and enthusiastically develop our strategic plan that takes us through the next decade, we invite all of you-students, alumni, clinical partners, parents, donors, faculty, staff, and colleagues-to join us in our initiatives.

Please consider a gift before the end of the year. Contact Melissa Cox, Development Officer, for more information about giving to nursing ([mcox@westga.edu](mailto:mcox@westga.edu); 678-839-6136).

Give by clicking [here](#).

Go West! Go Wolves!

# Inside this Issue

- UWG Nursing Program Recognized by US News & World Report and Princeton Review
- School of Nursing Recognized as College of Distinction
- 2021 Daisy Award Winners: Susie Jonassen and Dr. Nancy Capponi
- UWG THS SON Dyar Named President of Georgia Association for Nursing Education, Inc. (GANE)
- SON Student Named 2021 UWG Academic Recognition Day Scholar
- Good Girl: UWG Graduate's Service Dog Receives Honorary 'Dog-ree'
- The Good Fight: UWG Alumna Manages COVID-19 Testing, Vaccination Sites

- Eight New Faculty and Staff Join SON
- Four UWG THS School of Nursing Students Excelled in Both Academics and Sports
- Why I Chose UWG-Nursing in Newnan
- Kristin Mount Learns about Nursing as a Doula in the Philipines
- Anna Colapinto, RN, US Air Force Reserves, and UWG Nursing Student

- Nursing Alumna Recognized for 'Swift' Work During Pandemic
- UWG Takes Over *The Academic Minute*: Military Mom Speaks on Vets' Transition to College
- Derrick McCoy Receives The DAISY Award for Extraordinary Nursing Students

## BSN Fall 2020



## BSN Spring 2021





# UWG Nursing Programs Recognized

For the eighth consecutive year, UWG THS School of Nursing Graduate programs have been ranked by the US News and World Report for online grad nursing programs. This year 38th

<https://bit.ly/3pKbbOL>

The  
**Princeton**  
Review®

## UWG Nursing Program Recognized by Princeton Review as One of Nation's Best

by Sam Gentry

The Tanner Health System School of Nursing (THSSON) at the University of West Georgia offers one of the five [best online nursing school master's programs](#) in Georgia – as well as one of the best in the nation – according to [The Princeton Review](#).



The college admission services company published its list of top online Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) degree programs, with judging based on criteria such as flexibility, affordability and access to innovative technologies. Dr. Jennifer Schuessler, professor and dean of THSSON, said the recognition is a grand honor.

"I am proud of the faculty, staff and especially the students who have worked hard to give our program an outstanding reputation," she said. "There are many great schools of nursing in the [University System of Georgia](#), and to be identified as one of the best is a great feeling."

Schuessler said the three options provided through [THSSON's MSN program](#) – nurse educator, health systems leader and clinical nurse leader – meet the university's [strategic priority of relevance](#).

"Nurse leaders and educators are critical in today's complex healthcare system, and faculty are constantly assessing and revising the

curricula to assure relevance of our programs," she said.

THSSON frames its philosophy within the theoretical structure of caring as the essence of nursing. The faculty are committed to creating a culture of quality caring that fosters caring collaborative relationships between teachers and learners, patients, families and nurses, as well as other members of the healthcare team.

For eligible students considering enrollment in THSSON's MSN program, Schuessler said it is an outstanding opportunity for career advancement in the perpetually growing field of nursing.

"An MSN opens so many doors for any nurse seeking to expand their career options," she said. "Furthermore, master's-prepared nurses elevate patient care and nursing practice regardless of the setting. Our MSN program is a great option, because it is designed with the busy registered nurse in full-time practice in mind."

# Badges of Honor: UWG Recognized as College of Distinction for Fifth Straight Year

by Sam Gentry

For the fifth consecutive year, the University of West Georgia has been recognized by Colleges of Distinction, an organization that awards institutions committed to excellence in higher education.

UWG's College of Education, Richards College of Business and Tanner Health System School of Nursing (THSSON) have each been honored for the 2021-22 academic year. The university was also recognized for its work in career development, military support, and equity and inclusion.

"Excellence is our desired outcome at the University of West Georgia, and we are humbled by this recognition and fiercely proud of the work being done in these units in service to students," said UWG President Dr. Brendan Kelly. "As we continue to navigate our daily work in the curation of a first-choice university, it is resoundingly evident that our efforts are continuing to make important, lasting impacts and ultimately positive outcomes in the lives of those we serve."

Founded in 2000, Colleges of Distinction has advocated for institutions whose



undergraduate experiences are grounded in a philosophy of engagement, teaching, community and outcomes. The organization's selection process consists of detailed interviews and research regarding each institution's freshman experience and retention efforts alongside its general education programs, career development, strategic plan, student satisfaction and more.

The academic recipients – UWG's College of Education, Richards College of Business and THSSON – each earned the award for the fifth consecutive year. These units represent the university's commitment to achieving outcomes for students in alignment with the institution's strategic plan.

"I am incredibly thrilled for UWG to receive this honor," said Dr. Jon Preston, UWG's provost

and senior vice president for Academic Affairs. "As innovators, we strive to excel and provide our students with the highest caliber of education and distinctive experiential opportunities that go beyond the classroom. This recognition is another important indicator of our commitment to supporting students, helping them launch their careers even before they graduate."

The student experience outside the classroom was also recognized, with UWG's efforts in career development, military support, and equity and inclusion honored – each for the second consecutive year.

Dr. André L. Fortune, UWG's vice president for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, said the honor is of particular significance.

"It is a continuing point of pride for our institution to be recognized for equity and inclusion, as well as our work in military support and career development," said Fortune. "We continue to endeavor to foster an atmosphere in which all students belong and have limitless opportunities for growth, advancement and success."

# In Bloom: Two UWG School of Nursing Faculty Recognized by DAISY Foundation

by Sam Gentry

The DAISY Foundation recognized two University of West Georgia nursing faculty members for their outstanding contributions to the future of the profession.

Dr. Nancy Capponi, assistant professor, and Susie Jonassen, program director and clinical assistant professor, were nominated for the recognition by students and fellow faculty members from UWG's [Tanner Health System School of Nursing \(THSSON\)](#).

The [DAISY Award for Extraordinary Nursing Faculty](#) is presented to faculty who are not only dedicated to teaching their students but also exemplify compassionate care, a cornerstone of THSSON's mission. Positioning students for success is what Capponi and Jonassen strive for everyday.

"They're the reason I do my job," Capponi said. "I've been in academia since 2009, and I've always put the interests of the students first. It's very rewarding when they tackle something like a complex concept and then understand it. That's the most meaningful part of it to me."

The student who nominated Capponi, Janie Gantt '21, graduated from UWG with a [Master of Science in Nursing](#)



and is working toward a career in nursing education. She said nominating Capponi was an easy choice.

"I nominated Dr. Capponi for the award because I feel she exemplifies the School of Nursing's caring academic philosophy and the nursing profession as a whole," Gantt said. "She is an outstanding educator and nurse, and watching her work with the undergraduate students was an inspiration to me."

Jonassen said receiving the award is a great honor and she is proud to be making an important impact in the lives of students.

"The DAISY Award is a testament to a nurse's skill and dedication," she said. "For nurse educators, the award is a powerful reminder that their students and colleagues notice when they go above and beyond as nurse educators. I have nominated many nurse

colleagues over the years, but to be not only nominated but to win the DAISY Award is a very humbling experience."

It was no ordinary year, and both nurse educators agree the COVID-19 pandemic presented great challenges to students and faculty alike. Jonassen lost her father to the disease in February, turning the tragedy into a lesson of love and said her colleagues and students offered great comfort to her when it was needed most.

"Through that experience, I was able to learn more about compassion and care to share with my students during that time," she said. "The faculty and staff stepped up and assisted me during those hard moments, but my students also rallied together and provided care and support to me that still continues today."



# UWG's Dyar Named President of Georgia Association for Nursing Education, Inc. (GANE)

by Amadeu Guimarães

The Georgia Association for Nursing Education, Inc. (GANE) named the University of West Georgia's Dr. Kelly Dyar as its president. Dyar currently serves as a professor and faculty lead for the Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) nurse educator program at the Tanner Health System School of Nursing at UWG.

Dyar said she is honored to be in the leadership role and feels that the beliefs and goals of the organization are perfectly aligned with her own personal ideals.

"It is an incredible honor to be elected to serve in this capacity," she said. "I believe I need to encourage and support my students in achieving excellence, and I need to strive for excellence in my teaching practice and support my faculty colleagues by encouraging them to be excellent teachers. It is a natural extension of this for me to lead this organization in achieving its purpose."

The purpose of GANE is to promote excellence in nursing education within Georgia by accessing needs of Georgia nurse educators, nurses and Georgia's citizenry, and to meet those needs through participation and collaboration.



Dyar said one of the best parts of being in this position is demonstrating to her students the level of dedication she has to the profession. She hopes it will help inspire them to reach their full potential.

"This role will demonstrate my commitment to professional service but also show my students that I am practicing what I ask of them in encouraging them to meet these competencies," Dyar said. "I think it also will demonstrate that they, too, one day can take an active role in a nursing organization, perhaps even as an elected board member or president of the organization."

This role further benefits students as she is able to be an advocate for them within the organization. Each year, GANE

hosts a conference in which nursing students submit abstracts that go through a competitive review process to determine the students who will be included in the program.

"In this role, I can keep students informed about this process," she said. "One tangible thing I have done already is establish a process where students can submit their capstone projects to be included in the conference program. Currently, we offer a discount for students; however, they usually submit their capstone projects following their graduation, which means they no longer qualify for the student discount. Through the process I created, they can still get the student discount for 12 months following their graduation if they are presenting on anything they did as a student."

Dyar said, overall, the most important part of her work with GANE is making sure students have the tools they need to be successful.

"One way to help promote excellence in nursing education is by being a voice for students and ensuring that the organization maintains rigor in our educational offerings," Dyar said. "I look forward to further engaging in that work."

# UWG Senior Nursing Student Named 2021 Academic Recognition Day Scholar

by Taylor King

University of West Georgia Nursing senior Sydney Francis has been named the university's Academic Recognition Day scholar for 2021.

The Academic Recognition Day program honors undergraduate students from the University System of Georgia who are residents of Georgia and maintain a 4.0 grade point average. When she found out she had been named UWG's 2021 recipient, Francis was "completely surprised."

"I was shocked, honestly," she said. "I'm so honored and appreciative to be selected. I know there are so many amazing people on campus, and I know there are other students out there making big moves within the community."

Academic Recognition Day began more than 30 years ago as a celebration of Georgia students' academic achievement. The honorees receive a resolution from the Georgia House of Representatives, along with a letter of commendation from the University System chancellor.

"We are thrilled to recognize Sydney for the hard work, dedication, and academic



excellence she has exhibited throughout her time at the University of West Georgia," said Dr. Jon Preston, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs. "As a civically engaged, involved student with a caring spirit, she is an excellent representative of UWG and our values."

Ever since she was young, Francis has desired to care for others. She enrolled in the Tanner Health System School of Nursing and plans to become an oncology nurse.

Francis gives much of the credit to a high school science teacher who taught her about healthcare and the impact it has on people's lives. Her deepest passion for nursing, however, came from spending time as a caretaker for her grandmother.

"I want to provide the same care that my grandmother received," Francis said.

"I want to be a positive person in these patients' lives, so I can brighten their days and bring some positive energy."

In addition to her rigorous studies as a nursing student, Francis is active in many student organizations, including the Student Government Association (SGA), in which she served as the chief justice.

"Being a part of the SGA has allowed me to grow as a leader and have a positive impact on the campus community," said Francis.

Francis also served as a University Ambassador and became a member of the prestigious University Blue Coats.

However, Francis said none of her accomplishments would have been possible without the love and support of her parents, Ingrid and Norman.

"My parents have been my No. 1 supporters throughout my college career," Francis said. "I would not be the woman I am today without them, and I hope I can continue to make them proud."

*photography by Miranda Daniel*

# Good Girl: UWG Graduate's Service Dog Receives Honorary 'Dog-ree'

by Colton Campbell

When Maggie Leprone, a nursing student at the University of West Georgia, walked across the stage at Commencement, she wasn't alone.

Mona, her Diabetic Alert Dog, fetched herself a diploma, too.

Mona, a Labradoodle, became the first canine companion in UWG history to receive an honorary "dog-ree" during in-person Commencement ceremonies that honored all members of the class of 2020 – human or otherwise.

"I am so excited that Mona can be a trailblazer at UWG for students like me who require a service dog to manage their health," Leprone said.

Leprone, who has had Type I diabetes for nearly two decades, graduated with a bachelor's degree in nursing from the Tanner Health System School of Nursing (THSSON). She said diabetes has always been a part of her life.

"In my junior year of high school, there came a day when my blood sugar went way too low and I could not get it back to where it needed to be for a long time," Leprone said. "I drifted into a mini-coma during my sleep, and my parents could not wake me up for a long time."

"Once I came to and got my blood sugar back to a manageable level, my mom decided that I needed something I could really depend on in my upcoming college life."

Enter Mona, who was trained by Diabetic Alert Dogs of America to detect changes in blood sugar.

Diabetic Alert Dogs of America is an organization that provides



individuals and families who are challenged by diabetes with service dogs. The service dogs trained by the organization enhance an individual's quality of life by providing independence, companionship, and life-saving abilities.

"Getting Mona meant wading into unknown waters and learning new ropes in dealing with the general population," said Leprone.

"I have gotten a pretty good handle on informing the public about what it means to have a service dog and what kind of service dog mine is."

Dr. Jenny Schuessler, dean of THSSON, said Leprone's furry friend has accompanied her throughout her nursing education at UWG: in classes, clinical placement and labs.

"Maggie – and Mona, of course – are truly extraordinary," Schuessler said. "Having been a diabetic for most of her life, Maggie knows what it's like to need good nursing care, so to see her excel through nursing school has been such a rewarding experience. She credits the supportive care from her nursing professors for her success, but the faculty give all the credit to Maggie."

Now, with her nursing degree in hand, Leprone has accepted a position in the intensive care unit with WellStar Health System in Douglas County. She said that opportunity wouldn't have been possible without the "amazing and supportive care" she received from the faculty at UWG.



# The Good Fight: UWG Alumna and Student Manages COVID-19 Testing, Vaccination Site

by Sam Gentry

University of West Georgia nursing alumna Cindy Moore '11 and '21 was born with a penchant for helping others. As the nurse manager for Carroll County in the [Georgia Department of Public Health](#) (DPH), she has been on the front lines of COVID-19 testing and vaccination efforts for more than a year.

Moore is not only helping to lead the cause to end the pandemic, but at the same time, she earned her [Master of Science in Nursing](#) (MSN) at UWG's [Tanner Health System School of Nursing](#) and graduated Spring Semester 2021. The university made re-enrolling effortless, and the program fit her needs perfectly, Moore said.

"Coming back was very easy," she said. "The staff made enrolling simple and answered all of my questions. The MSN courses really work for people who have full-time jobs and children."

Moore's desire to become a nurse dates back to her childhood when her grandfather required hospice care toward the end of his life.

"Seeing the hospice nurses would always brighten his day even though he was in so much pain," Moore said. "It made me want to go into the nursing field."



When it was time for Moore to attend college, she turned to UWG for the training she knew would give her an edge in the nursing profession.

"When I was working on my undergraduate degree, all of the professors were always so nice and helpful," she said. "They always wanted you to know they were there for you, and it was quickly evident they wanted to go above and beyond for their students."

After graduating, she worked for [Tanner Health System](#) as a registered nurse (RN) on a medical-surgical floor and later worked for Tanner Home Health, eventually applying for an RN position with DPH at the Carroll County Health Department location.

"After I worked there for a little while, I realized it was really where I wanted to be," she said. "I had found my specialty."

After four years working as a nurse in the clinic, she was

offered and accepted her current position of county nurse manager, a role she loves. When Moore returned to UWG in fall 2019 to begin work on her MSN, she had no idea a global pandemic would reshape the landscape of her work.

"[COVID-19](#) has thrown a wrench into what our daily lives are like here," she said.

In January, when the first vaccines arrived locally, she managed the [vaccination](#) points of distribution. Although it has been an intense experience, Moore said she is never lost on the fact that it is all for the greater good.

"It's stressful at times, but it's worked out well," she said. "The overall experience has been very positive. We know we're doing our part for the health of the community, and people are so thankful and happy."



# Eight New Faculty & Staff Join SON

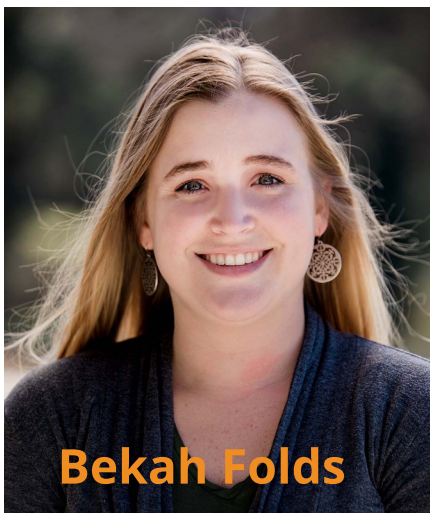
The SON welcomed five new faculty and three new staff members this year.

Cindy Johnson, PhD, RN, CHSE, was appointed as an assistant professor January 2021.

Four new clinical assistant professors joined us Fall Semester: Mystie Gatewood, MSN, RN; LaFortune Scott, MSN, RN, CNE; Jennifer (Jenny) Tucker, MSN, RN, and Kelsey Williamson, MSN, RN.

The three staff members are: Rebekah (Bekah) Folds, Academic Advisor 1;

Becky Gentry, BSN, RN, Clinical Placement Specialist; and Lyn Potts, MSN, RN, Experiential Learning Center Educator.





# Four UWG THS School of Nursing Students Excelled in Both Academics and Sports

The University of West Georgia Tanner Health System School of Nursing had four student-athletes place on the 2021 Gulf South Conference (GSC) Spring Academic Honor Roll: Nadia Davila in Women's Track & Field, Kaylyn Buchanan in Volleyball, Hillary Resendiz in Soccer and Janaisia Smith also in Soccer.

Along with her GSC championship performances in the high jump for both the indoor and outdoor seasons in 2021, UWG senior track and field standout Nadia Davila was also named to the GSC Women's Track and Field All-Academic Team.

A complete list of all honor roll student-athletes may be accessed here:

<https://bit.ly/3otldU7>

*Corey Cusick, UWG Athletics, contributed to this article*



**Nadia Davila**



**Janaisia Smith**



**Kaylyn Buchanan**



**Hillary Resendiz**



# Why I Chose UWG-Nursing in Newnan

My name is Kristie Gardner. I want to share my story in hopes of encouraging others that it is never too late to pursue your dreams.

I am a 46-year-old transfer student attending UWG to pursue my BSN in Nursing. I earned my first degree in 1999 in Middle Grades Education at LaGrange College.

Fast forward several years and four children later. Our family decided to adopt a medically fragile boy in 2017.

At the same time we were pursuing adoption, my father became ill and was brought home under hospice care.

My desire to become a nurse grew through my experience of caring for my dying father and being the caregiver to my new son.

In November 2016, my father passed away, and in September 2019, my medically fragile son passed away unexpectedly at the age of 7.

After experiencing such significant trauma, I felt lost and without purpose.

Due to fear, grieving, and not feeling good enough, it took some time to go after my goal of becoming a nurse.



Today, I feel stronger than I have ever been and with a drive to be the best nurse I can be one day. I have overcome many obstacles, and I am thankful to be back in school following my dreams. I chose UWG Newnan due to the proximity to my home.

I was also drawn to the Newnan nursing curriculum plan, which perfectly fits with my family and our needs. Also, the UWG nursing program has a strong, solid reputation of excellence which was another plus for me.

Although I am only in the beginning of nursing school, I am impressed with the kindness and

expertise of my professors. I feel they genuinely care and want me to succeed as a nurse.

I also love the diversity of the UWG campus. It has allowed me to connect with students from all walks of life.

Through the BSN program, I hope to narrow down my interests in the nursing field through my various clinical experiences.

Upon graduation, I hope to work in the hospital setting, either with pediatric or geriatric patients.

# Kristin Mount Learns about Nursing as a Doula in the Philippines

Nurses around the world share the honor of witnessing a person's most vulnerable hours. Those hours can be heaven or hell, brimming with the light of life or tinged with the darkness of death. In December 2019 (before the pandemic), Kristin Mount spent Christmas break working as an intern and doula (certified birth coach) at a labor and delivery hospital in the Philippines. That three-bed hospital, nestled between a church and a village, completely changed her view of the role of nurses.

Just several hours after landing in Manila, she was jumping into her scrubs to assist the midwives on call with a laboring patient. In the delivery room, Kristin witnessed a healthy boy take his first breath of humid Filipino air. Kristen assisted in fifteen births and witnessed fifteen first breaths during her internship.



Several days before coming home, a baby girl was born during the night shift. She was not breathing. For a brief moment, right before the midwife lifted the baby up to resuscitate her, the mother was positioned in such a way that she couldn't see the baby's color or condition. So the mother turned to look at me instead.

"During that one second of silence, paused on the threshold between life and death, I saw both fear and trust in the patient's eyes."

Kristin chose to earn the BSN through the Tanner Health System School of Nursing because the program prioritizes quality patient care and cultural competency. She is grateful to the faculty at UWG for fostering an environment that equips her to support patients around the world through life, death, and the moments in between.

Kristin is grateful to the mother in Manila, who looked at her during the split second before hearing her baby's first cry.

This experience helped Kristin understand both the weight and the wonder of her role as a future nurse.

# Anna Colapinto, RN, US Air Force Reserve, and UWG Nursing Student

Anna Colapinto, a nursing student slated to graduate in December 2021 from the UWG RN to BSN program, was fascinated as a child by the environment of the VA Hospital. She accompanied her Air Force veteran father, who had several orthopedic surgeries at the VA. As a result, she has always been intrigued by healthcare and what makes the human body work.

However, Anna didn't decide to pursue nursing until the Great Recession hit in 2008. She wanted to have a stable profession to provide for her family.

Anna's personality traits have always led to nursing, but she was hesitant, thinking it was an easy, stereotypical job for women.

Anna learned early in her nursing career that was not the case and that nursing is a challenging path, but rewarding and worth it.

After graduating from West Georgia Technical College with her associate degree in nursing



she chose UWG's RN to BSN program to complete her professional nursing education.

Anna explains, "As an Air Force reservist, I just got back from deployment earlier this year serving as a medical technician. I've personally struggled in the past with completing my degree, but the UWG professors have always been very communicative, reasonable, and understanding. It's the reason I've returned to school. The RN-BSN program is a wonderful program. Earning a BSN will help make me more qualified for positions in management. Also, if I pursue

becoming a nurse in the military, a bachelor's of nursing degree is required to serve as an officer."

Anna is passionate about bedside nursing and promoting a culture of teamwork. She currently works as a staff RN on a post-surgical cardiovascular step-down unit in an Atlanta hospital. She serves as a relief preceptor, relief charge nurse, and a shared governance council member.



# Nursing Alumna Recognized for 'Swift' Work During Pandemic

*"Dear Britta, I wanted to write to you and personally thank you for serving on the front lines of this pandemic and for being brave enough to put yourself in danger to help others. I am so inspired by your passion for helping and caring for your patients and I was so touched that you mentioned liking my music recently! I've sent you some cozy clothes for when you're off duty. I'll be thinking about you, and forever grateful."*

by Julie Lineback

It's not every day an average Joe or Jane gets fan mail from a celebrity. But that's exactly what happened to University of West Georgia alumna Britta Thomason when Taylor Swift sent the nurse a care package as a token of appreciation for Thomason's service during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"That was wild!" Thomason recalled. "I did an interview with the local newspaper to highlight women in EMS for Women's History Month, and I casually mentioned I was a Taylor Swift fan. Before I knew it, she'd written me a letter and sent me a whole box of stuff. It was surreal. I've loved her for a long time. I grew up listening to her music, and I relate to her."

The story went international: entertainment and news organizations such as [CNN](#), [People](#) and [BuzzFeed](#) wanted to interview Thomason.

As a child, Thomason would often visit her stepmother, a nurse, at work. She'd heard about the amazing programs at UWG's [Tanner Health System School of Nursing](#), and she knew she could get a quality education and enter a good profession with job security.

## *Love, Taylor."*

"One of the cool things the nursing school has are the simulators – mannequins that talk and move like they are real people," Thomason described. "It's as close as you can get to reality without being real. Plus, UWG is so close to Atlanta, we had the opportunity to go to the bigger hospitals and do clinicals there. I did my clinicals at [Children's Healthcare of Atlanta](#). It was awesome to have these hands-on experiences while still in school."

After graduating from UWG in 2011, Thomason started in the [Medical Center Navicent Health's](#) Critical Care Academy in her hometown of Macon, Georgia, and worked in the emergency room for two years. Then, she decided to do some travel nursing. Travel nurses are registered nurses who work in short-term roles at hospitals, clinics and other healthcare facilities around the world.

Six years into her career – and in the middle of nurse practitioner school – Thomason decided she wanted to be a flight nurse. As base clinical lead, she flew for [Air Evac Lifeteam](#) out of Milledgeville, Georgia, where



she was in charge of the medical crews, training and education.

Thomason, who doesn't currently fly, now serves as program director for Air Evac's Dublin, Georgia, base where she oversees operations. When the pandemic began, there was no slowing down.

"As a nurse, I see the impact we have on people every single day," she concluded. "The pandemic just validated our strength and resiliency and the importance of what we do. I learned that as strong as I thought we were, we're a lot stronger than that."

# UWG Takes Over 'The Academic Minute': Military Mom Speaks on Vets' Transition to College

by Colton Campbell

Although males are underrepresented in the nursing profession, men with military backgrounds are well-suited to the rigor and challenge of attaining a nursing degree, according to research from the University of West Georgia.

Dr. Kelly Dyar, an assistant professor in the [Tanner Health System School of Nursing](#) at UWG, said recruiting military veterans, who are predominantly male, may be one method of addressing the gender disparity in the nursing workforce.

Dyar presented her research to a broad audience as part of a segment on "[The Academic Minute](#)," a collaborative program from [WAMC public radio](#) in Albany, New York, and the [Association of American Colleges & Universities](#). "The Academic Minute" is a daily module featuring researchers from colleges and universities around the world, keeping listeners abreast of what's new and exciting in the academy.

Dyar knows well the challenges inherent in transitioning from military service to a higher education experience. As a military mom, she's seen her son – a second lieutenant in the [Georgia National Guard](#) – learn the ropes of a university after serving in the armed forces.

Veterans often encounter several barriers, frustrations, and



emotions experienced while attending nursing school, including complex mental health issues, perceiving classmates as lacking discipline, and a sense of isolation.

Through a qualitative research study with veterans from across the U.S., Dyar explored the lived experience of being a male combat veteran enrolled in a nursing program.

"I had several friends who returned from serving in a combat area who then tried to become a full-time student at a university," said Dyar, explaining her inspiration to take up this particular study. "Each of them struggled to make the transition from being a member of the military to returning home and becoming a veteran. Being a student was more difficult for them than it needed to be."

Dyar found that veterans credit their time in the military with helping them remain focused on achieving their objective of

becoming a nurse and provides them with the skills to manage the challenges in their nursing program.

Dyar said that many of the published studies she found during her research indicated that veterans tend to feel isolated on campus but didn't explain why. Through her study, Dyar identified that veterans are at a different place in their lives, felt like they didn't fit in with other students and tended to remain separate until they felt they could trust their peers.

Alongside this research, Dyar has also conducted a study in which she and Dr. Melanie Jordan, a senior lecturer of [English](#) at UWG, paired student veterans with creative writing students.

Dyar and Jordan are working on the analysis of the data from this survey and plan to publish the findings once complete.



# Derrick McCoy Received The DAISY Award for Extraordinary Nursing Students

One of the most coveted nursing student awards is The DAISY Award for Extraordinary Students. And, the UWG THS School of Nursing Carrollton Cohort 2021 DAISY Award goes to Derrick McCoy.

Created in 1999 by the Patrick Barnes' family in Patrick's memory, The DAISY Award is given to nurses and nursing students who provide exceptional kindness and compassion in the care of their patients ([daisyfoundation.org/about](https://daisyfoundation.org/about)).

Extraordinary and caring certainly describe Derrick. As written in his award nomination, "Derrick McCoy is a hard-working, dedicated nursing student and leader. He constantly receives compliments from patients for his amazing care. Derrick also demonstrates a commitment to the nursing field by challenging himself to expand his knowledge."

The DAISY Foundation recognizes that the road leading to this award may not be an easy one.

"Nursing School is....challenging, overwhelming, rewarding. It requires excellent time management skills, sacrifice and commitment," described on the [DAISY student award website](https://daisyfoundation.org/about).

Derrick agreed, stating that he actually had bumps along his path to nursing school.



"My journey to nursing school is not your typical story. I was denied my first time applying to the University of West Georgia's nursing program in 2017; however, through dedication and perseverance, I made my dream a reality by not allowing this obstacle to deter me from my purpose as a person or as a nurse."

He has worked hard and he attributes his successes and where he is today to several factors.

"I had God, my family, and mentors to guide me through my journey," Derrick said. "I made lifelong friends in my cohort. We held each other accountable and provided a listening ear whenever personal life tried to bring us down."

Derrick continues to show his leadership to his colleagues

and nursing students by sharing his experiences and advice.

"To my friends, who I met during my collegiate nursing career, I shall never forget the bond and friendships we have established and will cherish them forever," Derrick said.

"I encourage all students to investigate and seek help in planning any career options and find themselves mentors to help guide them down their paths of success. I currently have three mentors, all of which bring a different perspective to my career goal. Identifying my career goal was tough as nursing is such a broad field; however, having an inside man and woman has helped me exponentially in my successes."

In addition to nursing, Derrick's interests are expansive. He is currently working as a Registered Nurse at the Grady Memorial Hospital Emergency Care Center. When he's not working, this former resident of Rex, Georgia, is teaching himself Spanish, planning to have a mastery of it in two years. He is a bit "adventurous" as one time on short notice he decided to skydive at 15,000 feet, calling it a "great experience."

Read about The Daisy Award at its [website](https://daisyfoundation.org/about).



# Graduation Celebration Pandemic Style

