



## Remember Who You Are

Melissa Downs, MSN, RN, CNE, a clinical assistant professor, knew from a very young age she wanted to become a nurse. Coming from a long line of educators, and a father who taught high school for over 30 years, Melissa's path was essentially chosen.

After working as a clinical nurse professional for 26 years, Melissa made the decision to transition into an educator.

After researching several Master degree programs for nursing, she made the University of West Georgia her home. "I had decided to be a nurse educator long before I enrolled in the MSN program at the University of West Georgia," she said. "Academia is a completely different thing, but what was really great about coming here was how easy it was to transition."

"The faculty were caring and understanding and the program served me well as an adult learner," she said. With the program being completely online, she was able to work full time while obtaining her degree. "It was challenging and difficult to juggle everything, but in the end, it was so very rewarding."

Balancing home life and online classes finally paid off. Melissa received her MSN degree in the Nurse Educator Track on April 25, 2015, the day of her birthday. "I have a 25-year-old daughter and she helped me decorate my cap for graduation, and that was really cool. I will always remember when I graduated."

Four months after graduating, Melissa became a Clinical Assistant Professor to start her career as Nurse Educator at UWG's Tanner Health System School of Nursing. As course coordinator of the Clinical Practice I (first semester) for nursing students, Melissa finds joy in students' excitement as they learn the skills necessary to become professional nurses.

Another role she serves in at UWG is Dedicated Education Unit (DEU) Coordinator. A Dedicated Education Unit is a client unit developed into an optimal teaching/learning environment through collaborative efforts of nurses, management, students, and faculty. As DEU coordinator, Melissa works with various leaders like the Dean, Associate Dean, and BSN Director to partner with nurses, nurse educators, and administrators at WellStar Douglas.

"We have recently completed our first semester of the DEU and are gathering data and looking forward to the spring semester with the students and nurses," Melissa said.

In the DEU model, she provides the classroom information to the students, while the expert clinicians, the bedside nurses, work side by side with the students to care for their clients. This creates an optimal learning environment for the nursing students.

When asked what advice she would for students entering the same career path as hers, she had this to say; "look at the bigger picture more, and realize what you're learning will be applied, so focus on why you wanted to be an educator in the first place."

The last two years with UWG's THSSON has allowed Melissa to meld her love of clinical nursing at the hospital with her love of nursing education. "It really is the best of both worlds," she said. "My Father used to say, 'remember who you are!' and thanks to UWG, I am a nurse educator!"

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