

Teacher Keynote Award Recipient, Margaret Querec's speech

I would like to welcome everyone. The first thing I would like to say is that I am probably the most surprised person in the entire auditorium that I am standing in front of you as a keynote speaker. I never thought of myself as someone who had special talents to share. I am very humbled and honored to be sharing some of my thoughts with you today. I know that I would never be standing here without the support and kindness of many of my colleagues and friends. I have been very lucky to have so many talented people help me and mentor me throughout the years. As a school nurse working in education it is often difficult for staff to totally understand my job and sometimes my frustrations (even though they try). I am very fortunate that I have the support of my school nurse colleagues who have given me strategies, shared information and offered assistance when I needed it. My principals throughout my years at South Brunswick have also helped me to learn and grow and I can't forget to thank the secretaries in my building; they are always there when I need them.

I grew up in rural Montgomery Township in central New Jersey. It was all farmland then and everyone knew who you were. When I was young I spent most of my time outside and my mother didn't worry about where I was until it was suppertime. I was always in the woods or riding my bike somewhere. As kids, we organized our own games, used our imaginations and explored our world without a care. When we dreamed of what we would like to do when we grew up, I was always sure of one thing. I didn't want to be a teacher! In the 1950's the only career choices for girls were a secretary, a teacher or a nurse. Actually, my mother was a teacher (she taught in Hillsborough for 25 years) and my grandmother was a teacher. My grandmother graduated from Trenton Normal School, which eventually became The College of New Jersey in 1996. She taught in a one room schoolhouse in Montgomery Township. Amazingly, my sister is a teacher and my daughter is also a teacher. It must be genetic! I guess the idea of being a teacher was not appealing because I wanted to do something different from everyone else. I have an aunt who is a nurse; in fact she is one of my favorite aunts. She has her doctorate in nursing and greatly influenced my decision to try nursing. She encouraged me to get my baccalaureate degree, which was a very new idea for nursing in the 1960's. I was actually in the third baccalaureate nursing class to graduate from The College of New Jersey. It was a very difficult course of study, in fact my college nursing class started with 60 students and less than 30 of us made it to graduation. Of course, somehow, even though I started out as a nurse I still ended up being in the field of education and I am happy it turned out that way.

I immediately got married after graduation from college. In fact, I graduated the beginning of June and was married the end of June. I was really blessed to have married a wonderful person, who has always been supportive of my needs and allowed me to pursue my own goals. We are still married after 35 years. I worked in different areas of nursing for about five years. The hours were often tough. I worked the 3:00 pm to 11:00 pm shift for several years. I remember being wide awake at midnight when I finally came home from work while everyone else was sleeping. I watched lots of late night movies. I also worked as a visiting nurse and traveled all over Somerset County. It was

definitely a learning experience to be dealing with people in their own environment. As a visiting nurse, I visited all kinds of people dealing with many different situations from hospice to the joy of a new baby. I used to be out in the middle of snowstorms making visits and even had to change my own flat tire several times. I stopped working as a visiting nurse when I had my second child. I stayed home for several years with my children and then decided it might be time to try a new career.

I decided that school nursing was a job that would give me the opportunity to spend more time with my children. It also involved getting 16 more credits beyond my Bachelors, so I had to go back to college. I went back to my alma mater, The College of New Jersey to get certified. I was very lucky that the Principal of Constable School, Judy Zimmerman, hired me as the nurse in 1984. I thought that I would only work for a few years and make a little extra money but never thought I would still be at Constable School 22 years later.

The very first day I started at Constable School, I met a teacher named Corrine Decker; who taught kindergarten; she literally welcomed me with open arms. She gave me a huge hug and I was immediately a member of the Constable family. Constable was an accepting place and a great place to learn and get experience. Some things haven't changed, Constable School is still a great place, but of course there are some things that have changed – when I started at Constable School the secretary could smoke cigarettes in the main office, we put up Christmas decorations in December, we didn't have any computers, copies were made on the mimeograph machine, none of the children seemed to have allergies so no one needed an EpiPen and students could and did go home for lunch. One of the best things about being at Constable School in the 1980's was that even at the age of 35, I was one of the youngest people in my building. The summer before I started working, I remember spending time revising the fifth grade Respiratory Curriculum. I think this was the last time the curriculum was revised until we started work on the health curriculum again this past summer! Thankfully, we now have an updated health curriculum! (It has been a long time coming). The nurses have always played an important part of the delivery of the Health Curriculum. I have very fond memories of teaching health to the fifth and sixth grade students. I taught a unit on puberty to the sixth grade students for many years. I used to never be sure what kind of questions the students would ask, some were very tough to answer. Of course, typical questions were how are babies made? That was easy, but questions like what is oral sex tend to make you really think on your feet? I remember making babies by rolling dice and even having the students care for egg babies. The respiratory unit involved using a smoking machine and dissecting pig's lungs! The students always remembered that lesson. I also remember going on many overnight camping trips – my first trip was to PEEC (Pocono Environmental Education Center) in Pennsylvania and we were unlucky enough to get snowed in up there for an extra day. Of course, most of the students didn't have boots – so we had lots of wet socks. We came home on a day when the schools were actually closed for a snow day.

I made a decision to try something new in 1997. I moved to the Upper Elementary School and became the nurse for two years in what is now the Crossroads

North building. I liked working with 5th and 6th graders, and I made some wonderful friends within the district, but missed the warmth and neighborhood spirit of Constable. When my position was again available at Constable, I decided to move back.

I have lived in the town of Rocky Hill since I was married. My husband grew up in the town. He is someone who has solid roots and probably will never move. The town is about one square mile in size and has a population of about 650 people. It is a great town, where everyone knows you. My husband is very involved in the Fire Company and we are both involved in the First Aid Squad. We live in a very old house that has needed lots of love and attention over the years. I am not sure we will ever be done working on it. We have two grown children, who are married and off on their own.

One of the greatest challenges in my life was having my own son diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes. It is easier to be a support for others and educate them, than to deal with your own feelings and sorrow over that has happened to you child. Diabetes is a disease that never goes away – it is a constant job to maintain a balance and not fall victim to complications. My son was diagnosed when he was twelve, he is now 30. One evening after working a summer job at Grand Union supermarket, he managed to drive a brand new Ford pick up truck into a pole a block from our house. His blood sugar was low and he totaled the truck. He didn't want to tell anyone at the supermarket that he had diabetes, so he doesn't even remember getting in the truck. Of course, I am on the squad so I responded to the call. There isn't anything scarier than responding to your own child's accident. Luckily he wasn't hurt. When I realized he was okay, I was so upset with him for not being responsible! He has now become very good at managing his own needs. He is married to his college sweetheart and has moved to Seattle, where he works for Microsoft. It is very difficult to have to deal with a chronic illness throughout your life. Perhaps the feelings I experienced gave me more ability to relate to parents in my building dealing with students with health concerns. Being compassionate is an important part of school nursing.

I try to grow and do my best every day. In fact, my most recent challenge has been completion of my Masters in School Nursing at Monmouth University. Three nurses from South Brunswick decided it was a goal we always wanted to achieve and have been taking courses for three years. For people who are not native in technology, the idea of online assignments, writing papers in APA, using only primary sources and doing research is very scary. It is a very stressful but rewarding experience. I am proud that I have almost reached my goal. I should graduate in the spring and then I will see where all the education will take me? Perhaps it may be the beginning of another career.

School nursing is a much demanding job than when I started 22 years ago. School nurses must be prepared to handle emergencies every day and hopefully help make the schools a safer place to be. The nurses worked hard to have defibrillators in the district and are proud that we have them in all the schools (a big thank you must go to our current administration that supported the initiative). We also have computerized our offices and record each office visit. Nurses outreach to families in the community to assist them in times of need, are available for staff when they need medical assistance or

advice, and work closely together to keep up with new state laws and statutes. It is a lot more than just band aids on cuts!

The addition to Constable School that was completed this year has been like moving to a brand new building. It has been challenging! Change is always difficult! All of a sudden, Constable is no longer the little school. It is actually one of the bigger schools. My office is all new and I actually have an assistant this year for the first time. I am, of course, no longer the youngest in my school. In fact, now, I think I am one of the oldest people in the building.

In thinking about being asked to speak today, I felt it was a reflection of the fact that I must have been doing something right all these years. The lessons I have learned in my years as a nurse, educator and mother are that:

Lesson one: WE need to cooperate with each other and work together. I have learned that it takes the entire school community to help a child be successful. I don't mean just academically successful but also socially and emotionally successful. The school is a small community and should be the kind of place where everyone knows you and they accept you for the way you are. A small community exists for the benefit of everyone. We should try to understand that we all have different strengths and weaknesses. If we work together we can accomplish amazing things.

Lesson number two is that no one is perfect. I know I have made plenty of mistakes. Some huge ones. If you aren't willing to take a chance and try something new (which means there is the possibility of failure) you will never know how much you can achieve. In fact, I think teaching should be about trying new ideas and new methods. New ideas or methods don't always work and so we keep on trying. What works best for one student may not be the answer for another. Remember that we all make mistakes; the important thing is that we learn and grow because of them.

Lesson number three is to be sincere and honest. Children know if you really mean what you say. Children know if we are being truthful and honest with them. We can't pretend to be someone we aren't. Be true to yourself!

Lesson number four is to keep on learning and growing. I have an uncle who is 93 years old. He was a church organist but he also still takes piano lessons to improve his skills. My mother got her Masters when she was in her 60's. I am currently taking graduate level course and I think it is great to never stop exploring new possibilities. Learning is a lifelong pursuit.

Lesson number five: Don't be afraid to stand up for what you believe in. Speak up. My personality is such that I would never assert myself. I am a late bloomer at speaking my mind but I am becoming better at it. Don't wait as long as I did!

Lesson number six: Try to always help others. My husband has always been involved in the local Fire Company and First Aid Squad. I have been active in the First Aid Squad for over 20 years. I have had many nights of interrupted sleep, many dinners

that have been cut short (I even missed the end of a Thanksgiving dinner that was at my own house) and many times when I dropped what I was doing to help someone else. There is nothing as regarding as knowing that you were there for someone when they needed you and that you really don't want anything in return. I have very close bonds with the other members of the squad because we have to count on each other during difficult situations.

Lesson number seven. All the little things do count. I do little things all day. Most of the things I do if you looked at them individually are very insignificant. But every time a child comes in my office I try to listen to their concerns and help solve their problems. Many of their problems are really small, but they can be overwhelming to the child. Children remember the little things you do for them. I just had several students visit me who are now in their late 20's. They recalled their days at Constable School fondly and positively, which made me realize how much WE as educators make a difference. About 10 year ago, a fourth grade class wrote a poem for me. I have it framed and hanging in my office and I thought some of the lines were important for all of us to hear because they remind us of what is important.

A nurse or teacher is someone who...
Is nice to you when you are sick or having a bad day;
Heals your terrible bruises and makes you feel a lot better;
Is there when you need her;
Cares for children day and night;
Always smiles at me;
Cares about all the children in Constable School;
Makes me feel good and makes me happy;
Says you'll feel okay when you hurt yourself;
Cares forever and ever.

Children are the reason I am working. I am always teaching children even when I am not in the classroom. How great would it be if we could all teach for the child and not just to worry about how well they do on a test? Let's always make the children our priority!