Balancing Act

When Pamela Bajari’s youngest child was born with a serious heart defect, she spent many anxious days and nights at the University of Minnesota Medical Center. Gradually, she realized that the caregivers tending to her daughter (who eventually recovered) were not merely nurses, they were heroes. “I really admired the work the nurses were doing,” recalls Bajari, now a regional nurse administrator for the State of Minnesota’s Adult Mental Health Division. “They became role models for me. I decided I wanted to be a nurse so I could help other people.”

Thus inspired, Bajari (rhymes with “diary”) enrolled at Ridgewater College, a 20-mile commute from the New London home she shared with her husband, Larry, and their three young children. After completing the LPN (Licensed Practical Nursing) program in 1985, she landed a job at the Paynesville Community Hospital, 15 miles from home.

For the next two years, Bajari juggled work, family and the RN (Registered Nursing) program at
Ridgewater, graduating as an RN in 1987. After a six-month stint at Rice Memorial Hospital in Willmar, she accepted a position as a staff nurse at the Willmar Regional Treatment Center (WRTC). In 2002, she was named director of nurses (DON) for both WRTC and the St. Peter Regional Treatment Center, and became the first DON in Minnesota to cover more than one site. That job eventually evolved into her current position, in which she provides nursing administration for state-run behavioral health services throughout greater Minnesota.

It’s a travel-intensive position. “Greater Minnesota is everything outside of the seven-county metro area,” says Bajari, who also holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees in nursing from Bethel University in St. Paul, with her master’s work focusing on organizational leadership. “We have crisis services in Duluth and Mankato. We have 10 community behavioral health hospitals all the way from Rochester to Bemidji to Fergus Falls. And we have staff out in all these communities providing services. We cover the whole state.”

**A holistic approach**

Bajari enjoys psychiatric nursing because of its holistic approach. “It’s not just about behavioral or mental health issues,” she explains. “You need to take a person-centered approach because the patients we serve also have complex health and addiction problems. You have to look at all the aspects of each person’s life and bring them all together to improve their outcomes.”

Bajari takes great pride not only in her work but also in the state’s commitment to nursing. “I accepted a job with the State of Minnesota because I really believed and still believe that it’s important to bring high-quality and evidence-based practices into psychiatric nursing,” she says. “Minnesota is a forerunner in providing quality and innovative mental health services across the nation.”

She adds that the state’s outstanding reputation was a big reason why she was one of 20 nurses in leadership roles across the nation selected as 2008 Robert Wood Johnson Executive Nurse Fellows. “The three-year fellowship program recognizes that nurses must play a pivotal role in leading the redesign and success of healthcare,” Bajari says. “The fellowship is an opportunity to develop critical leadership skills and to work with a nationally recognized team of coaches and instructors.”

The fellowship includes at least two week-long seminars each year as well as various other training sessions and a healthy dose of independent study. Each fellowship member is required to develop a personal development plan and a leadership development project. “For my personal development plan, I’m working with an executive coach as well as with a mentor outside of nursing who can help me develop greater business acumen,” Bajari says. “My leadership development project is all about integrating primary health care into our behavioral health settings.”

Her selection as a Robert Wood Johnson fellow has already begun furthering her career goals. “The part that I appreciate most about my job is that I work for an organization that is very forward thinking and allows me to continue to grow as a leader,” she says. “The next best thing I like is bringing other people along and being a mentor myself. The fellowship is helping me advance both of those goals.”

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**Learning at each step**

After 25 years, Bajari still feels a debt of gratitude to the school where it all began. For the last three years, she has served on Ridgewater’s Nursing Advisory Council. “One of my greatest mentors throughout my entire career was Sonja Westre, my nursing instructor from the LPN program at Ridgewater,” she says. “She has always been available to me and I respect her so much for her ability to see the strength and the potential in people and to push and encourage them.”

Working full time, attending Ridgewater, and raising a family was a lot of hard work, but Bajari, who still intends to get her doctorate in nursing practice, wouldn’t have had it any other way. “I had three small children under the age of seven,” she says. “Going off to get a bachelor’s degree in nursing didn’t fit my lifestyle at that point, so I made a conscious choice to take the long route. I have never regretted going that route. I think there’s extremely valuable learning at each step in the process.”

Today, Bajari, a grandmother of nine who enjoys riding Harley Davidsons with her husband, occasionally marvels at the path she has traveled in life. “One of the unique things about me is that I was married at 17, and I’m still married to my husband,” she says. “For me to have the support of my family as I’ve moved up through the profession the way I have is remarkable. I’ve been blessed.”

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*Phil Bolsta is a Blaine-based freelance writer.*