

A Lifetime of Service in Public Health

The Dr. Kathleen Gremel Nursing Scholarship Fund opens doors for UNC students pursuing a degree as a family nurse practitioner, with a preference for recipients specializing in public, community health. Preference is also given to students who are planning to serve people in Colorado and who identify as Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, or a Person of Color. The focus of the scholarship reflects the work and honors the memory of Kathleen Gremel, RN, BSN, FNP, MSN, Ph.D., who made a difference to people in many communities through public and community health.

She and husband John Merrill, Ph.D., first met in Colorado on a church-group winter retreat where they became friends. John studied physics at UC Berkley, attending grad school in Illinois before moving to Boulder to pursue a Ph.D. in planetary and solar physics. Kathleen, a registered nurse, had just enrolled at UNC to pursue her bachelor's in nursing. During her final year at UNC, she and John met again and fell in love. Kathleen graduated, John defended his Ph.D., and they were married before moving to Miami, where Kathleen worked in public health. While there, she earned a family nurse practitioner (FNP) certificate through the University of Miami and worked with the Miccosukee Tribe in the Everglades.

A move to Rhode Island allowed Kathleen to earn a master's in nursing at Boston University and went on to work in public health nursing with a dominant agency in the state, establishing herself and her stature within the profession. John worked at the Graduate School of Oceanography at the University of Rhode Island (URI).

As they established themselves in their fields, their family also grew with the adoption of a son and a daughter. John's success in securing grant funding led URI to open a tenure-track position where he studied the wind-borne transport and deposition of materials to the ocean, supervising the work of graduate and postdoctoral students. There he sought funding from the National Science Foundation, NASA and other agencies. Kathleen sought experience in case management with an HMO and led a visiting nurse agency in a suburban area in Rhode Island. She pursued her Ph.D. in nursing at URI and went on to a faculty position at Rhode Island College.

As John retired, he and Kathleen began to plan a move west, but she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, undergoing surgery a few weeks before their house sold. Six cycles of platinum-based chemotherapy, multiple setbacks and nine months later, the couple moved to California.

But the move west and the diagnosis didn't mean a departure from service and teaching. While John tutored physics part-time at a nearby community college, Kathleen went to work as a public health nurse, specializing in maternal-child health. "She updated the Departments' Web page. It was in terrible shape," John remembers. "There was no information, for example, on how a woman could find a bilingual gynecologist."

Bringing her education and experience to the community, she continued to make a difference with her efforts in public health and also took time to travel with her sisters.

When Kathleen suffered a recurrence, she resumed chemotherapy. "As is common with those whose initial diagnosis is Stage IV cancer, before long the chemo became ineffective," John says.

“Our children and their guests were visiting when Kathleen began hospice care. She was going through items she'd collected, dividing them between the children: puzzles, hats, and costumes. When she came across a pair of silly glasses, I knew we had to take a picture,” John says. “I believe the photo encapsulates Kathleen's message to cancer: ‘You can weaken my body, you can shorten my life, but you can't take *even an ounce* of my spirit.’”

Her dedicated service to public and community health will continue through the students who receive the scholarship that bears her name.

“I hope that a scholarship might enable a student to think about the communities where they'll work as nurses,” John says. “To think about how they relate to those they care for and the groups they serve. Perhaps one or more of the supported students will silence their phone, or put it in a pocket, and strive to deepen their understanding of the course material (even if it's organic chemistry).

“Kathleen grew up in unpretentious circumstances in dryland farming country, and was able to build on what she'd learned, combining her inherent capability with perseverance and dedication. I can imagine nursing students at UNC finding their own way in a different world, in a challenging time. I know that Kathleen would be pleased,” he says.