



Compassion, resilience, partnership, and respectful inclusion became the guiding principles of the University of Virginia School of Nursing under **Dorrie Fontaine**, who retired as Dean in 2019. Among the hallmarks of Fontaine’s 11-year tenure as Nursing School Dean were a focus on creating

a healthy work environment; fostering inter-professional education, where nurses and physicians train together; and furthering efforts for inclusion and diversity in nursing and across the University. Her work came into play during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nurses everywhere began reconsidering the profession because of stressful work environments, lack of support from management, harassment, and fatigue. In 2021, Fontaine and two UVA colleagues, Tim Cunningham and Natalie May, published *Self-Care for New and Student Nurses*,

a timely book that presented expert guidance from contributing authors.

As dean, Fontaine founded UVA’s Compassionate Care Initiative in 2009, with a mission of alleviating human suffering through developing compassionate caregivers and systems. The initiative nurtures students, faculty, staff, and clinicians to become resilient and know that caring for themselves provides a foundation for the safe and exceptional care of others.

She established an Office for Inclusion, Diversity

and Excellence at the School of Nursing in 2014, which launched the school's "Inclusion, Diversity and Excellence Achievement Initiative." Among the many accolades she has received, she was honored with the UVA Health System's Martin Luther King Jr. Award in 2015.

Prior to her 2008 appointment at UVA, Fontaine was Associate Dean for Academic Programs and Clinical Professor at the University of California San Francisco. She held Associate Dean positions and taught at Georgetown University School of Nursing and the University of Maryland. While she served as Dean, she lived with her family in Pavilion IX, where she and her husband, Barry, hosted many birthday parties for Nursing School staff and faculty as well as hundreds of UVA events.

WHY DID YOU COME TO UVA?

I had been an academic Associate Dean for 13 years at Georgetown in the School of Nursing and then at the University of California, San Francisco. I was first attracted to the University of Virginia because it is a world-class university.

But right after I got here, a benefactor invited me to go to a Zen Buddhist retreat in Santa Fe, up at 7,800 feet. She sent 15 of us, nurses and physicians from the medical school and the hospital. It was an eight-day silent retreat called "Being with Dying." The focus was how to take better care of the dying, which is also about caring for the living because while you want a peaceful death, you also need to focus on the strong emotions and feelings of the living as they make memories.

The Retreat was for clinicians, but it was heavy on mindfulness, meditation, yoga, and healthy eating. I came back a very different person. I was always into relationships and how we care for one another, but this put a whole new dimension on it.

So, I found people at UVA who were into contemplative practices like mindfulness/meditation and brought these concepts into our school. The benefactor funded an endowed professor in compassionate care. We had funds to do retreats and programs for students and faculty, and it's lasted for 11 years now, the Compassionate Care Initiative.

I think there's a point where you've done good things and people come along with you, but sometimes you can stay too long. I thought 10 years was the right time to step down and then President Ryan asked me to stay another year. I wanted to allow momentum for some new fresh ideas as well.

continued

In Her Words | Dorrie Fontaine

HOW HAS UVA CHANGED SINCE YOU'VE BEEN HERE?

UVA changed their focus to a broader look at what it means to have an inclusive, diverse environment during my time. I hired a former professor in 2014 from University of California, San Francisco. Susan Kools became our Associate Dean for Diversity and Inclusion and because she had worked really well having UCSF look critically at themselves for how they created a warm, welcoming environment where diversity can flourish, I chose to try that approach as well. It matched my healthy work environment initiative, where you create a place where everyone thrives.

It wasn't just counting or numbers – “We want to be 40 percent diverse.” We built a strategic plan for diversity, “IDEA: Inclusion, Diversity & Excellence Achievement”, that includes curricular review, anti-racism and implicit bias training, how to have conversations from diverse perspectives, and more. My associate dean led these efforts in our School and across Grounds and the Health System.

Then, in 2017, the white supremacists marched down the Lawn. Now, I lived in Pavilion IX then, so they marched right in front of my house. And people were stunned and shocked, but it was also a time of, well, how are we doing?

I would say, “We can do better. This isn't who we are.” One of my African American faculty, Dr. Ishan Williams, said to me, “Dorrie, yes, it is who we are.”

And it was like, whoa, so Charlottesville – parts of it – and several people in academia at UVA were actually not as welcoming and not as open. But how to change that? What does the environment right now feel like for people of color – it was really highlighted. And, so, we had work to do on what does it really mean to be a compassionate, inclusive school? What does it feel like to be a student at UVA? It wasn't all positive, but we shone the spotlight on it and knew we had work to do.

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WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A WOMAN IN A SIMILAR POSITION TODAY?

You have to show up and speak up. I think the word is courage. People often have good ideas and they either feel shut down or they're intimidated. Women need to be recognized for what they bring.

Even to this day, women continue to be shut down and interrupted. The data is they're interrupted more than their male colleagues. When I would sit in deans' meetings and there might have been two or three women

deans, the men very often did try to take over. But then you just have to say, “You know, I think there’s another way to look at this,” and then support each other.

Women have to look at their styles, where are they most comfortable, and then try to get out of their comfort zone. I think mindfulness and pausing and trying to always have a compassionate action towards people has helped me the most, not cutting somebody off, but on the other hand, not tolerating abusive behavior on anyone’s part.

And that’s how you’re successful as a leader, bringing people together, convening, listening to them, telling them how valuable they are. When you have a sit-down dinner for faculty and staff, you’re telling them that they’re valuable.

WHAT LEGACY ARE YOU LEAVING?

I had a one-year sabbatical, and I wrote a book on self-care for new and student nurses with two colleagues, and 30 wonderful people – physicians, lawyers, nurses – wrote chapters. It’s doing well. We wrote it for student nurses initially. Sigma, our publisher, is the honor society for nursing, and they said, you know, everybody’s going to need this book. So, then they changed the title to “new and student nurses.”

It’s the hottest topic right now. Everyone is really looking at how to prevent burnout. You can’t prevent stress, that’s normal, but what you can do is to build resilience. I wrote a chapter on how to find a healthy work environment for your first job, how to build resilience so you can thrive in the workforce.

And I did that at UVA. I tried to make the academic environment in my own school a healthy work environment where everyone could flourish. The book will be there forever. And it’s kind of the culmination of all the things we fostered at UVA through the Compassionate Care Initiative.



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