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How a retired faculty member is breaking down barriers for men in nursing

When Chuck Baker retired from Centennial College's School of Community and Health Studies in 2013, he knew his work was not done. Having spent his career advocating for the role of men in nursing, the former professor was determined to continue breaking down barriers in the traditionally women-dominated field.

"Nursing is part of the human condition – it's about being there for other humans in their time of need," he says. "It's about empathy, care and compassion, and that does not come with a gender."

Yet as a member of Centennial's nursing faculty for nearly 30 years, Chuck was used to being one of the relatively few men in his profession. "During much of my career, whether in nursing practice or nursing education, I worked with many wonderful nurses – but they were almost exclusively women," he says.

His experiences are not unusual: in Canada today, just eight per cent of all nurses are men and male faculty members are few and far between in academic settings. The reasons for the continued underrepresentation of men in the field are varied and complex, ranging from societal expectations to the pressure of stigma in classrooms or clinical settings.

"In some ways, male nurses have an opportunity to gain insight into what women have experienced for so long while trying to break into male-dominated professions," says Chuck. "Although men in the nursing profession are usually welcomed by their female colleagues, the public in general is not there yet. Many men in nursing feel they have to work harder to be recognized or taken seriously, and have to break through a lot of preconceived stereotypes."

Following his retirement, Chuck and his husband, Harold Durnford, knew they wanted to create a legacy that would help more men study nursing and enjoy rewarding careers. After carefully considering their options, they decided to establish an endowed scholarship at Centennial that will help generations of men pursue an education in nursing.

"The financial support provided by the scholarship is important, but possibly even more important is the psychological impact," says Harold. "This scholarship will let every recipient know that someone believes in them, that someone knows they can do this. It's a recognition of their efforts to pursue something they're passionate about and make a difference in the field."

A lifetime of breaking down barriers

Chuck and Harold are no strangers to breaking down barriers. In 1996, the two made history when they became one of the first gay couples in Canada to adopt a child.

It took several years for Chuck and Harold to successfully navigate through the adoption process as a gay couple. After struggling to find acceptance in Canada for their desire to be parents, they ultimately identified a gay-positive adoption agency in Atlanta, Georgia. They brought their son, Russell, home when he was four months old.

Well ahead of its time, Centennial allowed Chuck to take a leave of absence to be at home with Russell during his critical first year. "The folks at Centennial were just excellent," he says. "This was long before extended maternity or paternity leaves were the norm. They even had a baby shower for us!"

Russell is now 24 years old and taking after his fathers by blazing a trail for men in another traditionally female-dominated industry: early childhood teaching. Although his work is on hold while Canada navigates through the COVID-19 pandemic, Russell is eager to continue making a difference in his field.

A shared vision for the future

With Harold about to retire from his career at RBC at the end of May, the two have been spending more time thinking about the legacy they want to create. They envision a world in which empathy and skill are valued prerequisites in any field, and particularly in nursing.

"I would like to see people have more experiences of men as nurses in healthcare settings, so that their perception of the impact men can create is changed," says Chuck. "Once people get to know the individual, they realize it's about the person – not their gender – and what they bring to the profession."

Harold wants to encourage other community members to consider the power of creating a scholarship – particularly through a gift of securities, which proved to be a highly effective and manageable way for the couple to establish their fund.

"Gifts of securities are an incredibly tax smart way to give, and can allow individuals to make larger donations than they may otherwise be able to," he says. "Being able to establish our scholarship in this way directly with Centennial has created a deeply meaningful experience for us."

To learn more about establishing a scholarship at Centennial College or giving a gift of securities, please contact Linda Barlow at lbarlow@centennialcollege.ca.