

All in the family

Nurse Maureen Kenney has spent more than 30 years caring for patients at Huntington Hospital. Now her twin daughters are following in her footsteps.

Long before health care workers were widely hailed as pandemic heroes, Emily Kenney and her fraternal twin sister, Elizabeth, had an inkling that their mother was extraordinary. Friends and neighbors would routinely show up at their doorstep or call at all hours with some sort of crisis, and their mother, Maureen, would jump into action.

Whether a child on their block had taken a tumble or a relative was worried about chest pain, Maureen — a registered nurse who has spent the majority of her career at Northwell Health — seemed to know exactly what to do. “She always had a first aid kit on hand and a doctor’s phone number at the ready,” recalls Emily. “We were so impressed that Mom could handle these scary situations.”

By the time Emily and Elizabeth were finishing high school, their mother’s example had become a beacon. They both felt destined to pursue nursing.

“A couple of my aunts are also nurses, and my cousin is a nurse practitioner. It kind of runs in the family,” says Elizabeth.

Maureen, a nurse manager in orthopedics at Huntington Hospital, wasn’t totally surprised at her daughters’ career choice. “I’d often come home from work and tell them about my day, and I think it was clear that I loved my job,” she says. “I would have supported them in whatever they wanted to do. But I was thrilled that they chose nursing.”

“My mom is undeniably a huge reason we both felt this pull toward nursing,” says Emily. “Our whole childhood, she’d share stories of good days and bad days, but there were more heartwarming than sad ones.”

ROOM TO GROW

As a career, nursing offers a remarkable number of directions in which to grow. You can care for patients dealing with a sudden emergency — or support those coping





Maureen Kenney, RN (center), flanked by her daughters, both nurses: Elizabeth, left, and Emily, right.

with a chronic condition. You can work in a hospital, doctor's office or patient's home — or lead studies that uncover better approaches to treatment. Emily and Elizabeth each chose paths best suited to their personalities. Now 26, both are at Northwell, but in very different capacities: Emily works the night shift as an intensive care unit (ICU) nurse at Huntington Hospital, while Elizabeth practices pediatrics at Cohen Children's Medical Center.

"I've always had a good connection with kids," says Elizabeth, who served as a camp counselor and babysitter as a teen and is now working to become a nurse practitioner in pediatrics. "I just know how to relate to them."

Emily, on the other hand, thrives in the fast-paced environment of the ICU. "Things are ever-changing in critical care, and I'm learning all the time," she says. "I feel like I hit the jackpot when I landed in my current position."

NURTURING LEARNERS

Northwell made it easy for Emily and Elizabeth to join the health system, thanks to a number of programs designed to lure top nursing students. One onramp was the "externship" program at Huntington Hospital, a paid summer program that welcomes about 100 rising junior nursing students each year. As externs, Emily and Elizabeth shadowed a clinical preceptor, assisted in patient care and attended weekly enrichment sessions that provided exposure to different arms of the health care system.

After the program ended, Emily and Elizabeth continued working at Huntington Hospital. "Most externships are just 6 to 8 weeks long, but once Northwell admits you into the program at Huntington, you can kind of work per diem," Elizabeth explains. "I was able to pick up shifts whenever I was home on a school break, or even when I was just home for a weekend."

When the sisters graduated college, they were offered full-time positions at Northwell. That's not unusual, says Kathleen Casler, MS, RN, senior director of clinical professional development for the health system. "More than 60% of each year's externs



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become Northwell employees, on average,” she says.

INVESTING IN GROWTH

Externship programs are just one way Northwell is working to ensure a steady stream of skilled nurses — a priority for the health system in light of a nursing shortage that’s expected to impact the country in the coming years. One report projects a shortfall of up to 450,000 nurses in the United States by 2025. Northwell has responded by creating an environment that respects the expertise of nurses while providing them with plenty of opportunities to learn. Emily, for instance, joined Northwell’s fellowship program right after graduating from school.

“It was a lot of classroom time — it almost felt like another semester of college — but I absolutely loved it,” says Emily. “There was extensive training in simulation labs, as well as more hands-on exposure to patients. I feel like I was taught exactly what I needed to know, so I could be confident when I began caring for my own patients.”

Northwell also offers scholarship and tuition reimbursement programs

to assist nurses who seek advanced degrees. The support helps ensure that talented nurses make the health system their permanent home. Indeed, in 2022, when the accumulated stress of the pandemic and other factors led to an average national turnover rate for nurses of 27%, Northwell managed to keep its own turnover rate to less than half that: just 13%.

“I think it has to do with our culture,” says Maureen White, RN, executive vice president and chief nurse executive at Northwell. “We’ve been working on creating an empowering environment for our nurses for the past 25 years.”

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Emily and Elizabeth find nursing just as satisfying as their mother’s stories made the field sound back when they were children. They were undaunted by launching their careers in the midst of the pandemic.

“The way I learned how to be an ICU nurse was by learning how to care for Covid patients,” says Emily, who completed her critical care fellowship just as the virus was filling the ICU with patients on ventilators. “They were so sick — it was unlike anything my senior colleagues had ever seen. But over those first few months, I learned so much. And even on the hardest days, I still felt proud to be a nurse. I never, ever wavered.”

For Elizabeth, working in pediatrics and caring for seriously ill children has brought its share of turmoil and gratification. “We’re strangers to these kids when we first meet them, and when they have to get blood taken or have an IV put in, it can be really scary for them,” she says. “But there’s always a moment where you can distract them or make them smile. Even on a crazy day, I know that if I had one instant where I made a child’s day a little better, then it was worth it.”

The Kenney sisters are in it for the long haul. They know they always have the support of their colleagues at Northwell. “We have a couple of nurses on my floor who have worked here for 20 or 30 years, and I found them a little intimidating at first,” Elizabeth says. “But now, if I have a question, they are the ones I go to because they know everything.”

It’s that spirit of camaraderie that’s supported her mother Maureen throughout her career, and it’s why



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she feels so strongly that her daughters have chosen the right career.

“What’s kept me in my position so long is that we’re a team at Northwell,” she says. “We count on each other’s strengths and we provide support where it’s needed.” Thinking of the colleagues she’s worked with for years and her daughters who have joined the team, she sums it up: “We’re family,” she says.

Top honors

Huntington Hospital is the only hospital on Long Island to earn five consecutive Magnet® designations from the American



Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC), which recognizes excellence in nursing.

Recently, Marie E. Mulligan, PhD, RN, chief nursing officer at Huntington Hospital, was selected as Fellow of the American Academy of Nursing. She is one of 253 nurse leaders across the globe recognized in 2023 for their substantial, sustained and outstanding impact on health and health care.