

Longhorn Nursing

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**The Children's Wellness Center
Expands in Del Valle**



The University of Texas at Austin
School of Nursing



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A message from Dean Kavita Radhakrishnan

Dear Texas Nursing Community,

It is an honor and privilege to serve as Dean of The University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing. I accepted this role with a clear focus: to provide stability while maintaining the remarkable momentum of our school—supporting our people, advancing our mission and ensuring that we continue to move forward with purpose.

I am deeply grateful for the encouragement, trust and support I have received from our faculty and staff as I fulfill this responsibility. It has also been a privilege to meet many alumni, donors and friends of the School, and I have been humbled by their generosity, enthusiasm and steadfast belief in Texas Nursing. These conversations continually remind me that our community extends far beyond the Forty Acres.

The theme of this issue, “Community Impact,” reflects who we are and what we do. From celebrating 30 years of the Children's Wellness Center and its exciting new home to our faculty advancing science through NIH-funded research and developing innovative AI tools, our impact continues to grow. Our faculty and students are strengthening communities locally and

globally, while programs such as our long-term care education initiatives are reaching thousands of providers across Texas.

Perhaps nothing represents our future impact more powerfully than our graduates. During the 2025–2026 academic year, we celebrated 244 exceptional graduates ready to carry forward the Texas Nursing tradition of changing the world: 124 BSN, 79 MSN, 12 Post-Master's Certificate, 20 DNP and 9 PhD graduates. Each will take the knowledge, values and spirit of this school into communities where they will care, lead, discover, teach and serve.

These stories remind us that community impact is not one program or accomplishment, but rather the collective result of people committed to something larger than themselves.

To our students, faculty, staff, alumni, donors and community partners: thank you. Your dedication, generosity and belief in our mission sustain our momentum and make our impact possible.

I am proud to serve alongside you and excited about the work ahead.

Hook 'em!

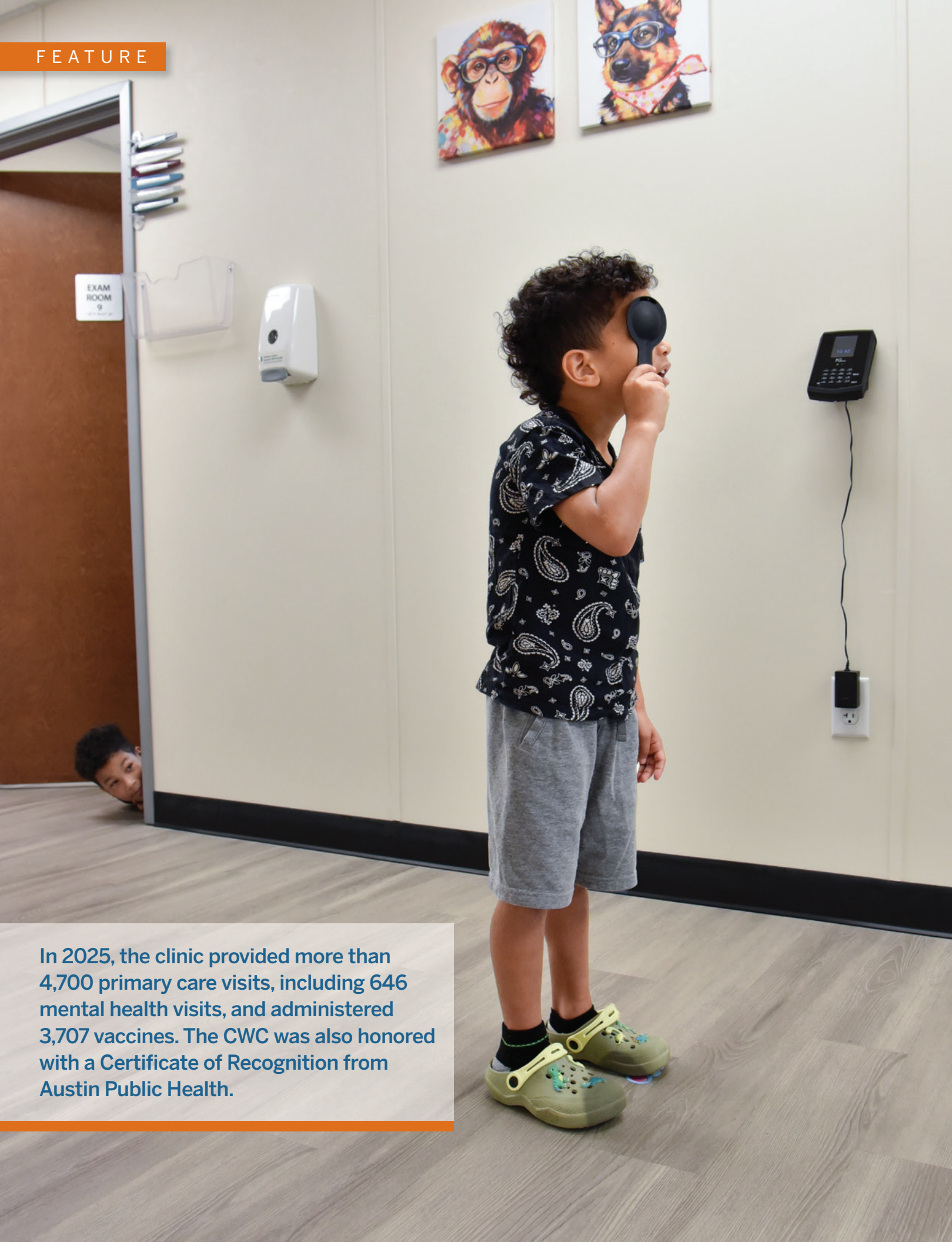
Kavita Radhakrishnan

Kavita Radhakrishnan, PhD, MSEE, RN, FAAN, FAHA

Dean

Laura Lee Blanton Chair in Nursing

The University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing



In 2025, the clinic provided more than 4,700 primary care visits, including 646 mental health visits, and administered 3,707 vaccines. The CWC was also honored with a Certificate of Recognition from Austin Public Health.



Regina Leal checks in a two-month-old infant for a wellness exam.

Looking Good at 30

New Building Reinvigorates CWC Mission after Three Decades

Atzhiry Bocanegra-Flores remembers visiting the Children's Wellness Center in Del Valle when she was 12 years old.

At the time, the clinic operated out of aging portable buildings — a modest setting that could make an uncertain first impression. But what Bocanegra-Flores remembers most is not the building. It's how she felt inside it.

"As a patient, I loved coming here," she said. "I felt safe, I felt cared for, I felt listened to. My mom loves coming here—to this day, she still brings my little brother. It's definitely a place where we felt taken care of and felt that connection with the provider."

A decade later, Bocanegra-Flores, now 22, has returned to the same clinic — this time as a medical assistant helping care for families like her own.

And the clinic itself has entered a new chapter.

In August 2026, the Children's Wellness Center (CWC), op-

erated by The University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing in partnership with Del Valle Independent School District, opened the doors to a new, purpose-built facility. Made possible through a generous anonymous donation, the building provides an expanded, modern space for a mission that has been rooted in the Del Valle community for 30 years.

Growing Alongside Del Valle

The Children's Wellness Center began with a simple request for help.

Dr. Stephanie Morgan, director of practice innovation, director of the wellness clinics and professor of clinical nursing, said the center traces its roots to Susan Franchetti, an area nurse who recognized a need for greater access to healthcare among children in the rural Del Valle community and reached out to the School of Nursing.

“Susan asked whether we could help, and the School of Nursing stepped up,” said Morgan, PhD, RN, FNP-BC. “That commitment to serving Del Valle families has remained at the heart of the clinic ever since.”

Over the next three decades, both the community’s needs and the clinic’s ability to meet them grew.

Today, the CWC serves patients from birth through age 21, providing primary and preventive care, immunizations, mental health services and social support. Families can also access resources beyond the exam room, including a food pantry, baby formula, clothing, benefits application assistance and a workspace with free Wi-Fi and printing services.

In 2025, the clinic provided more than 4,700 primary care visits, including 646 mental health visits, and administered 3,707 vaccines. The CWC was also honored with a Certificate of Recognition from Austin Public Health, recognizing its significant contribution to community vaccination efforts.

For longtime Del Valle resident Anthony Rainey, the importance of having those services close to home became clear when his 17-year-old son, Karie, needed a dental check-up.

“The clinic provides outreach for kids who are underserved,” Rainey said. “There’s a lack of coverage in the area, and they provide a really good service. There’s a lot of preventive work they do that provides an opportunity for those who come. It means a lot knowing that they’re there.”

“Slowly but surely, we’ve been adding more services,” said Ana Loera, BSN, Primary Care Nurse Supervisor at the clinic.

That growth has allowed the CWC to meet more of the needs that families bring through its doors.

Learning Through Service

As the CWC’s services have grown, so has its role as a place for education and hands-on learning.

Nursing students gain clinical experience working alongside faculty and providers, while students from other disciplines, including nutritional sciences, have opportunities to engage with the community and participate in research.

“We serve the community while also giving students the opportunity to train and learn alongside us,” Morgan said. “They gain meaningful exposure to community-based healthcare and a deeper understanding of the challenges many families face.”

Those educational opportunities also extend to Del Valle students. Through its partnership with DVISD, the clinic works with students enrolled in the district’s four-year health science program, creating a pathway for young people to gain experience in healthcare before graduating from high school.

For Bocanegra-Flores, the partnership between the clinic and DVISD helped turn her experience as a patient into a pathway toward a career in healthcare.

After coming to the CWC as a patient, she participated in the health science program and gained the educational foundation to become a medical assistant. Today, she is building a career in the same place where she once received care.

“I’ve always wanted to be in the healthcare field,” Bocanegra-Flores said. “I want to keep on with the program and eventually become a nurse with hands-on experience.”

“The clinic provides outreach for kids who are underserved. There’s a lack of coverage in the area, and they provide a really good service. There’s a lot of preventive work they do that provides an opportunity for those who come. It means a lot knowing that they’re there.”

— Del Valle resident Anthony Rainey

A New Home for the Mission

After three decades of expanding its services, educational opportunities and community reach, the CWC now has a space designed to support the full scope of that work.

For decades, the CWC delivered care from separate portable buildings. The new facility brings its healthcare, educational and community services together in a building designed specifically for the clinic’s needs.

The facility includes 10 exam rooms, a conference room, dedicated storage for groceries and other community resources and a private nursing room for new mothers.

Loera said the new facility will make a significant difference in the patient experience while giving staff, faculty and students a space better suited to their work.

For Morgan, the expansion is also a reflection of the many people and organizations that have sustained the clinic over the years.

“It takes a lot of people and a lot of partnerships to make it work,” she said.

For a clinic that spent decades delivering care from older, separate buildings, the new facility represents more than a physical upgrade. It gives the CWC a space that reflects how much its mission has grown since 1996 — and room to continue that growth.



Barbara Espinosa performs a hearing screening on a young patient.



The Children’s Wellness Center includes a lactation quiet room.

A Partnership for the Future

That growth has been made possible by a longstanding partnership between the School of Nursing and DVISD — one that brings together healthcare, education and community service in a shared commitment to Del Valle families.

“Since opening in 1996, the nurse-led Children’s Wellness Center has embodied the School of Nursing’s mission of bringing together education, clinical care and community service in meaningful ways,” said School of Nursing Dean Kavita Radhakrishnan, PhD, MSEE, RN, FAAN, FAHA. “The partnership with DVISD reaffirms the Center’s commitment to the health and well-being of children and families in the Del Valle community.”

DVISD Superintendent Dr. Matthew Gutierrez said the new center will be a boon to new generations of students and their families.

“This center is an investment in the health and future of our students,” he said. “Through our partnership with UT Austin School of Nursing, we’re bringing vital resources directly to our community and removing barriers that can stand in the way of student success.”

Thirty years after the CWC first began serving Del Valle, the new building marks how far the clinic has come while creating space for what comes next.



The Children’s Wellness Center staff has many years of collective experience and education. First row, left to right: Stephanie Morgan, PhD, RN, FNP-BC; Barbara Espinosa, CMA; Sandra Martinez, CMA; Paige Frock, DNP, APRN, CPNP-PC; Elly Morrison, CMA; Atzhiry Bocanegra-Flores, CMA. Second row, left to right: Juana Gallardo, APRN, PMHNP-BC; Cara Green, CPPM; Maritza Rodriguez, Office Assistant; Camila Ramirez, Volunteer; Ana Loera, PCNS, BSN; Jacki Turner, MSN, APRN, CPNP; Regina Leal, MSN, APRN. Third row, left to right: Jesus “Jesse” Ybarra, CHW; J’Kaideon Mitchell, CHW Assistant.



The UT Austin School of Nursing Children’s Wellness Center had its ribbon-cutting ceremony and grand opening on August 5, 2026.

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“I’m excited and thankful for being given this opportunity to lead in a place I genuinely care for.”

— Dean Kavita Radhakrishnan

CLEAR GOALS

Dean Radhakrishnan Charts the Path Ahead

Although Dean Kavita Radhakrishnan has held several leadership positions in the School of Nursing, serving as dean has been a different experience altogether.

Radhakrishnan, PhD, MSEE, RN, FAAN, FAHA, took the reins as interim dean in March 2026, leading the School until her permanent appointment in September.

“I’m excited and thankful for being given this opportunity to lead in a place I genuinely care for,” she said. “I hope we can work together to achieve meaningful and lasting impact for the School of Nursing and the communities we serve. The interim period truly prepared me for this role – it gave me the confidence that I could function as a dean because of all the support I received. “A recurring sentiment I heard was, ‘You should do this!’ and I think that really helped.”

The news of Radhakrishnan’s appointment drew an enthusiastic reaction from the faculty, students and staff.

“The School of Nursing community – faculty, staff and students – are thrilled that the Provost has named Kavita Radhakrishnan as our Dean,” said former Dean Alexa Stuijbergen, PhD, RN, FAAN. “We know her and trust her from our experience working alongside her as a faculty member and as an administrative leader of the School. She has strong passion and enthusiasm for the nursing profession and we know her to be a genuine and thoughtful leader who will lead our School with integrity.”

“The School of Nursing is indispensable to UT’s growing academic health enterprise, and Dr. Radhakrishnan is the right leader for this important moment of growth,” said William Inboden, Executive Vice President and Provost at UT Austin. “Her leadership and vision will build on the School’s strengths in education, research and patient care as we expand UT’s impact across Texas and beyond.”

Radhakrishnan’s interest in nursing was sparked while she was growing up in India, when her father experienced a cardiac crisis and she found herself wishing she could do more to help. She went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in electronics engineering from the University of Mumbai before coming to the United States to continue her education.

After earning a master’s degree in electrical engineering from The University of Texas at Arlington, Radhakrishnan felt increasingly drawn to health care and the opportunity to make a direct difference in people’s lives. While in Massachusetts, she began volunteering as a nurse.

“I liked how nursing involved problem-solving and analytical work,” she said. “But I could clearly see there were gaps in technology that frustrated nurses’ efforts to provide the optimal level of care. I realized that was a good space for me, that I could bring my engineering background into nursing to improve processes, develop better technology, and make nurses’ lives easier.”

She subsequently earned both a BSN and a PhD in nursing from the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Kavita Radhakrishnan Notables

- Fifth dean of the School of Nursing
- Holder of the Laura Lee Blanton Chair
- Former assistant and associate dean for research
- Former director of the Luci Baines Johnson and Ian J. Turpin Center for Gerontological Nursing
- Received more than \$10 million in funding from agencies including the National Institutes of Health, the Texas Department of Health and Human Services and Sigma Theta Tau International
- Authored more than 65 articles, which have been cited in publications from more than 30 countries
- Fellow of the American Academy of Nursing and the American Heart Association
- Inducted in 2025 into the Sigma Theta Tau International Nurse Researcher Hall of Fame

Radhakrishnan might have stayed on the electronics side of medicine, but she felt that to truly make an impact, she would need to understand nursing firsthand.

“I had to be in the trenches and learn what it is to be a nurse and see through the lens of being a nurse,” she said. “I’m so grateful I made that move because it definitely helped. It informed the way I design technology interventions in my research because I have that insight into the lived experiences of patients.”

Radhakrishnan could have chosen to remain in a clinical setting, but while working on her doctorate, she became interested in the academics of nursing.

Now that she’s no longer interim dean, Radhakrishnan – who came to UT Austin in 2012 – is ready to begin pursuing her own initiatives for the School.

“The biggest difference is that I can start initiating some long-term plans,” she said. During her interim appointment, she explained, the primary focus was maintaining stability and improving morale. “Now that things have settled, I’m going to look for opportunities to grow and find exciting ways in which the school can contribute to Texas and beyond.”

Given how impressed she has been with the faculty, staff and students at the School, Radhakrishnan is optimistic about the future.

“What I learned in the interim period was that we have a good School,” she said. “Staff and faculty are really committed to their mission. I realize that we are all united by a shared purpose. I found some gaps and challenges that could help make our mission better, and those are some of the initiatives I’ll be tackling as the dean.”



School of Nursing Faculty Transforms NIH Funding into Impact

NIH grants are having a positive effect on faculty research projects

UT

Austin School of Nursing faculty are translating National Institutes of Health (NIH) funding into action, advancing research that addresses a wide range of health challenges and engages different populations and communities.

"The breadth of NIH-funded research across our School reflects a culture of innovation, collaboration and scientific excellence," Dean Kavita Radhakrishnan said. "It underscores that UT Austin Nursing is not only educating future nurse leaders but also generating the insights that will transform health care."

Together, the projects show how NIH support gives nursing researchers the time and resources to translate evidence into tools, knowledge and services tailored to the communities they aim to serve.

Some recent NIH award recipients from the School of Nursing include:



Yaolin Pei

Yaolin Pei, PhD, recognized that cultural beliefs and experiences can shape how Chinese American families understand and approach dementia care. To better understand these differences and how they shape care, she launched a study supported by an NIH R00 grant. During the three-year R00, the independent-research phase of NIH's Pathway to Independence Award, Pei will test a culturally adapted decision aid with 60 Chinese American dementia caregivers who must choose between tube feeding and careful hand feeding for a family member with advanced dementia.

"We're interested to know if this intervention can improve their knowledge and reduce their decisional conflict," Pei said. "We're also interested to see if participants remain involved in the study, since the topic of death and dying is a sensitive subject for those Chinese American dementia caregivers."

Pei said she has noticed differences in how Chinese Americans respond to care versus other demographic groups. For example, the study has shown that Chinese Americans may view tube feeding as a comfort-oriented and responsible option when oral intake becomes minimal.

"Feeding decisions within this community are highly complex," Pei said. "It's not just medical decision-making. It's also related to other issues, like family harmony and family responsibility."

One goal of the study is to get dementia caregivers more active in discussing their decision-making on feeding options with their family members and health care providers. Often, Pei said, caregivers don't enter these discussions until they've reached a crisis moment.

"It is important to engage caregivers, health care providers and family members in timely discussions before a crisis occurs, so that feeding decisions can be considered proactively and the patient's previously expressed wishes can be recognized and respected," she said.

"We've hypothesized that depression may be linked to an inflammation in your brain."

— Linda Kim



Linda Kim

Linda Kim, PhD, MSN, RN, PHN, CPHQ, CGNC, FAAN, joined UT Austin as director of the Center for Global Nursing and Health in May 2025. She is leading a five-year study supported by a highly competitive R01 grant from the National Institute of Mental Health. Her study examines whether repeated COVID-19 infections and social determinants of health affect immune-inflammatory pathways linked to depression risk, with a particular focus on health care workers.

Kim received the grant while working at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, where the project was part of a larger study.

"We've hypothesized that depression may be linked to inflammation in the brain," Kim explained. "My research focuses on eicosanoids, which are biomarkers associated with inflammatory processes in the body. Previous studies have shown that these biomarkers differ in people who have had COVID-19, and we're investigating whether there is a connection between those changes and depression following infection."

The study also examines how demographic and social factors, including race, gender, age and socioeconomic status, may shape both the risk of COVID-19 exposure and mental health outcomes. "These factors can influence not only how frequently they are exposed to COVID-19, but also their vulnerability to experiencing depressive symptoms," Kim said.

While the study remains in the data collection phase, Kim hopes to begin analyzing the data in spring 2027.

"In underserved populations, there is really limited support."

— Yang Li



Yang Li

Yang Li, PhD, RN, received an R01 grant from the National Institute of Nursing Research for work that focuses on underserved women who face domestic violence.

For example, women of Chinese origin often don't seek help because of social and cultural factors.

"They may feel embarrassed, they may feel stigma, they may feel ashamed to disclose their abusive experiences to people or to seek outside help," said Li. "A lot of them aren't aware they are being abused. Violence, especially domestic violence, is a hidden issue among some cultural groups, including the Chinese culture. They don't think it's a big issue—they see it as conflict between couples. It's a private matter."

"Even if they want to seek help, they don't know where to look," she said. "America has done a good job in making services available, but Chinese American women who may face language barriers don't often know where to find them."

Survivors of domestic violence may experience low self-esteem, depression and self-blame from the violence that happened to them.

Even when they find the resources, Li said women of Chinese origin are often afraid counselors won't understand their background and culture, so they think they won't get the support they need.

Li has been working on another study with Dr. John Lowe that looks at domestic violence among Native American women, who experience disproportionately high rates of violence. The research seeks to better understand their experiences and identify ways to strengthen support and prevention efforts.

"It's a really shocking proportion," Li said. "Many live in rural areas and are isolated from help. In underserved populations, there is really limited support."

Providing support can be challenging because partner violence is a cycle of abuse, and those relationships are often dynamic. Li said her team aims to empower Native American women who have experienced partner violence to make informed decisions about the relationship, increase their safety and improve their mental well-being.

"Our goal is not to convince them to end the abusive relationship; our goal is to help them make informed decisions," she said. "We help them develop individualized safety plans and provide information about available resources so they can decide what is safest and best for their individual circumstances."

García, Horner Join School of Nursing's Emerita Ranks

Two longtime School of Nursing professors retired in 2026 and were awarded Emerita status in recognition of their distinguished service



Dr. Alex García

Alex García

Alexandra A. García, PhD, RN, APHN-BC, FAAN, served as professor in the School of Nursing and Interim Director of the St. David's Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Research in Underserved Populations (CHPR). She previously served as the Graduate Advisor from 2020 to 2022, Assistant Dean for Graduate Programs from 2022 to 2024 and Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs from 2024 to 2025.

Dr. García is also a courtesy professor of Population Health at Dell Medical School, where she served from 2016 to 2020 as Chief of the Division of Community Engagement and Health Equity. She also held educational leadership roles at Dell Med, including associate director of the Primary Care, Family and Community Medicine Clerkship and director of the Distinction in Population Health project from 2018 to 2019.

"As a deeply committed educator, Dr. García has taught across the spectrum of undergraduate, graduate and professional programs at UT Austin and Dell Medical School," Dean Kavita Radhakrishnan said. "She has developed and led innovative courses in public health nursing, global health, epidemiology and health promotion. Dr. García is a highly regarded mentor who has chaired or served on dozens of PhD dissertations, DNP

scholarly projects, master's and undergraduate honors projects and she is widely recognized for her generosity, rigor and dedication to student and faculty development."

Her research focuses on social, cultural and economic factors that influence self-management of chronic diseases and symptom experiences, particularly among Latino adults with type 2 diabetes and other co-occurring chronic illnesses.

She previously directed faculty-led study abroad programs to Guadalajara, Mexico, and Heredia, Costa Rica. She also collaborates with clinicians and nurses in Eldoret, Kenya, on education and research projects.

Dr. García is a Fellow of the American Academy of Nursing and the Texas Public Health Association. She is past President of the Texas Public Health Association and past Chair of the Public Health Nursing Section of the American Public Health Association.

Dr. García received her Diploma in Registered Nursing from The Union Memorial Hospital School of Nursing; her Bachelor of Science from The College of Notre Dame of Maryland and her Master of Science from The University of Maryland at Baltimore. She earned her PhD in nursing from The University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing.

"As a deeply committed educator, Dr. García has taught across the spectrum of undergraduate, graduate and professional programs at UT Austin and the Dell Medical School."

— Dean Kavita Radhakrishnan

Drs. Alexandra García and Sharon Horner both retired in June but will continue their work as educators and researchers.



Dr. Sharon Horner

Sharon Horner

Sharon D. Horner, PhD, RN, MC-CNS, FAAN, received her PhD in Nursing and her MSN in Parent-Child Nursing from the Medical College of Georgia prior to joining the UT Austin School of Nursing faculty in 1994. Her research focuses on improving the health of children and families, with particular emphasis on childhood asthma.

As principal investigator (PI) or co-PI, she has been awarded \$7.6 million from extramural funding sources and has collaborated as a co-investigator (Co-I) on projects totaling an additional \$8 million. Her funded research has received support from the National Institutes of Health, including the National Institute of Nursing Research, the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute and the National Institute of Child Health & Human Development, as well as the U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development and the Environmental Protection Agency.

"Dr. Horner's scholarship is prolific and enduring," Dean Radhakrishnan said. "She has authored nearly 100 peer-reviewed publications, book chapters and invited journal columns and has delivered almost 200 refereed and keynote research presentations at international, national and regional conferences. Her work is widely cited and has had a sustained impact on nursing science, pediatric health, family nursing and health equity research."

Dr. Horner is perhaps best known for her intervention research with school-aged children with asthma and their families, particularly those living in rural communities. This NIH-funded

"Dr. Horner's scholarship is prolific and enduring. She has authored nearly 100 peer-reviewed publications, book chapters and invited journal columns and has delivered almost 200 refereed and keynote research presentations at international, national and regional conferences. Her work is widely cited and has had a sustained impact on nursing science, pediatric health, family nursing and health equity research."

— Dean Kavita Radhakrishnan

intervention work focused on strengthening asthma-management behaviors among children and parents and improving health outcomes. Her *Enhancing Children's and Parents' Asthma Management* intervention became a significant component of her long-running program of research.

The intervention produced significant improvements in children's asthma-related quality of life, asthma self-management behaviors and skills in using a metered-dose inhaler, along with reductions in asthma severity, hospitalizations and emergency department visits.

Dr. Horner is a Fellow of the American Academy of Nursing and was inducted into the Sigma International Nurse Researcher Hall of Fame in 2022. At UT Austin, she served as Associate Dean for Research and Director of the Cain Center for Nursing Research from 2011 to 2024 and as director of the St. David's Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Research in Underserved Populations (CHPR) from 2015 to 2025. She also held the Dolores V. Sands Chair in Nursing Research from 2011–2024. A longtime member of the National Association of Clinical Nurse Specialists, Dr. Horner was elected to the 3-year sequence of leadership roles of President-elect, President and Immediate Past President (2015–2018). She has been honored as recipient of the National Association of Clinical Nurse Specialists' 2014 Sue B. Davidson Service Award, the Southern Nursing Research Society 2013 Award for Research in Minority Health and the Texas Rural Health Association, 2013 Researcher of the Year. 🐾



HNSA Impacts Nursing Students and Community

HNSA students and advisors lead “Get Moving” Zumba sessions at East Austin public libraries, promoting cardiovascular health, physical activity and healthy lifestyles in our community.

Barbara Cardoza was getting ready to transfer into the School of Nursing in 2023 from a Houston College when a friend invited her to a multicultural Friendsgiving celebration thrown by the Hispanic Nursing Student Association (HNSA).

The person who invited her, Alexander Claros, eventually became president of HNSA while Cardoza is now the vice president.

“HNSA has really been a home away from home,” said Cardoza, who was awarded the \$8,000 Roger and Barbara Powell Scholarship for Nursing. “I’m a first-generation student, so being able to find an organization that has people with a similar background as me – not only culturally, but goal-wise – just felt very comforting.”

Cardoza, now a second-semester junior, said she’s amazed by the broad range of students who are members: from freshmen to seniors from all different walks of life.

“It was great to have multiple mentors and multiple events where we can serve the greater community,” she said. “Just being a part of HNSA has been very rewarding. If there’s one thing that’s been a consistent part of my life in college, it’s been HNSA.”

HNSA has a diverse membership and is open to all students regardless of race, said Dr. Janice Hernandez, HNSA’s director. Hernandez said the key aspect to the organization’s popularity among students is its mission.

“(HNSA) guides students to become leaders and advocates in the community,” said Hernandez, DNP, APRN, FNP-C. “We support college and high school students who are interested in becoming nurses. Our goal is to help the community, and everyone’s invited.”

The program has had a major impact on Austin, as members of the organization work with local churches to educate their members on heart disease and diabetes.

Angela Oxford, the food pantry manager for St. Louis King of France Catholic Church in Austin, said HNSA members interact with her clients, teaching them about nutrition, measuring blood pressure and blood sugar and providing them with healthy recipes.

“One of the things we’re blessed to have is having them come here,” Oxford said. “They come to talk about diabetes or blood pressure, because a lot of people are affected by it. It makes people realize that they may have a problem.”

Oxford said that one time, HNSA was providing blood pressure and blood glucose checks on a woman whose numbers were too high, and they sent her to the hospital.

“We’re not always very conscious of our health, so for me, HNSA has had a really good impact,” Oxford said.

“HNSA guides students to become leaders and advocates in the community. We support college and high school students who are interested in becoming nurses. Our goal is to help the community, and everyone’s invited.”

— Dr. Janice Hernandez



HNSA students provide blood pressure screenings at Vestido Rojo, empowering Latina women through heart health education, early detection and prevention of heart disease, the leading cause of death among Latina women.

“Our mission is to support people of all communities who don’t have access to healthcare,” Hernandez said. “All over Texas, we do what we can.”

That mission takes many forms—from partnering with the American Heart Association and offering hypertension screenings to teaching community members hands-only Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR). HNSA has also collaborated with libraries in East Austin to provide blood glucose and blood pressure screenings and launched “Get Moving” nature walks to encourage physical activity, Hernandez said.

“Our mission is to support people of all communities who don’t have access to healthcare. All over Texas, we do what we can.”

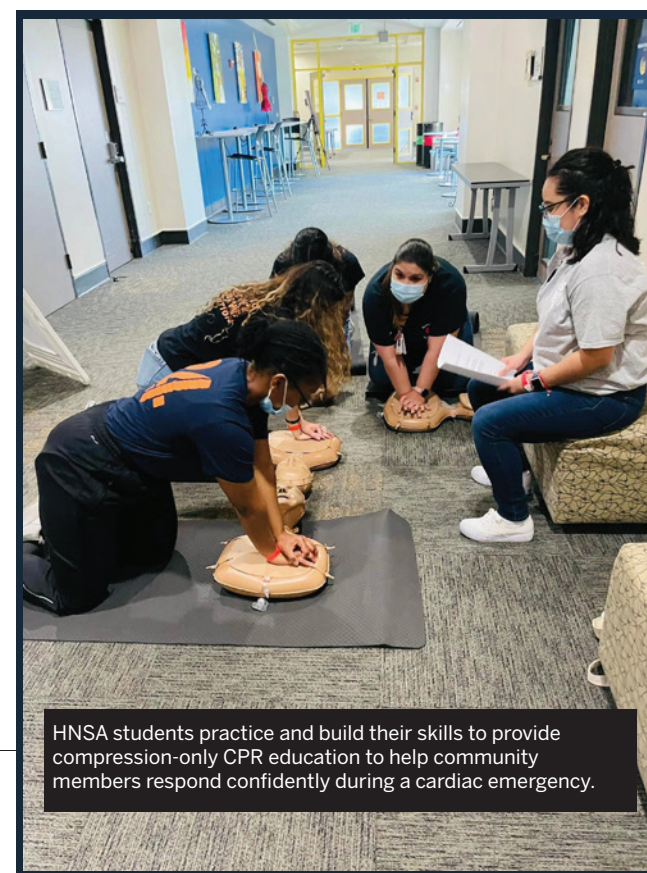
— Dr. Janice Hernandez

HNSA also focuses on nursing education for its members. That can range from helping first-generation college-bound students and giving college tours to creating a day in the life of a nursing student program that gives students insight into the career for which they are training.

HNSA also works with students who are seeking to transfer into the School of Nursing, such as tutoring them in courses such as chemistry that they need to get accepted into the school.

Hernandez, who earned her bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees from the School of Nursing, draws on her journey to encourage students to believe in their potential.

“I tell my students to believe in yourself, own your potential and go after your goals,” Hernandez said.



HNSA students practice and build their skills to provide compression-only CPR education to help community members respond confidently during a cardiac emergency.

Breathe Easy Hadi Helps Train Kenyan Nurses on Birth Care and Resuscitation

PHOTOS BY: CHELSEA DEE

Long before Africa became part of her professional journey, Beth Hadi felt a strong connection to the continent. “Even when I was little, I was drawn to Africa,” said Hadi, DNP, MSN, MHA, APRN, CPNP-AC. “I always thought about Ethiopia, because it was on the news. But then I had the opportunity to go to Kenya – and I’ve never stopped going.”

Hadi first went to Kenya in 2011 as part of an organization called the Ubuntu Life Foundation (ULF) – which translates to “I am because we are” – working on training and equipping nurses in the area. ULF is a Kenyan nonprofit focused on improving child health and wellness by strengthening communities with integrated clinical care, maternal-newborn health initiatives and providing training programs to support and sustain local health-care providers.



Beth Hadi (above) and Toshia McKeon (left) traveled to the ULF campus in Maai Mahiu, Kenya, volunteering their time and medical expertise to care for our kids and work alongside the Ubuntu Health Clinic team.

Hadi said the dedication of the ULF team, led by Lydia Mbugua, is one of the reasons why she consistently returns to work in Kenya.

In May, Hadi wrapped up her DNP project entitled “Impact of Helping Babies Breathe Training on Neonatal Resuscitation Skill Retention in Rural Kenya,” and the impact the project had was profound.

Hadi credited School of Nursing professors Dr. Stephanie Key, Dr. Alex Garcia, Dr. Julie Zúñiga and Dr. Jennie Joyner for her success with the project.

“This project is grounded in this same philosophy – Ubuntu – and reflects the power of partnership and shared purpose in improving outcomes for newborns in resource-limited settings,” Hadi said.

“The beauty of “Helping Babies Breathe” is that it equips already incredible nurses with the knowledge, skills and tools they need to feel even more confident and prepared to save a newborn’s life. It’s an honor to support these amazing nurses as they continue the important work they do every day.”

— Dr. Beth Hadi

Hadi worked on the project with fellow DNP candidate Toshia McKeon, who has focused on birth asphyxia, the leading cause of neonatal mortality in Kenya. She said it’s preventable and treatable with timely intervention during the first minute of life, also known as the “Golden Minute.”

According to the World Health Organization, the neonatal mortality rate in the United States is 3.2 infant deaths per 1,000 live births. In In Naivasha, Nakuru County, Kenya, the neonatal mortality rate is 41.9 deaths per 1,000 live births. These figures highlight the significant challenges facing newborn care in the country.

Hadi said she worked with the World Health Organization, the American Academy of Pediatrics and Ubuntu Life Foundation to implement the “Helping Babies Breathe” program in Kenya.

“We trained eight registered nurses from the hospitals and outlying clinics, and we were just floored by how eager they were to learn, their enthusiasm and their skill set,” Hadi said.

Hadi said most of the nurses delivered at least 10 babies a month, if not more.

“It’s amazing that they’re delivering all these babies, but they didn’t have the equipment,” she said. “The beauty of Helping Babies Breathe is that it equips already incredible nurses with the knowledge, skills and tools they need to feel even more confident and prepared to save a newborn’s life. It’s an honor to support these amazing nurses as they continue the important work they do every day.”

The team started with one nurse, who learned how to train eight more nurses in the technique.

“They learned the entire class in one day and they were so phenomenal,” she said.

Hadi’s project centered on retention of knowledge after three months and six months.

These nurses then trained 88 of their peers within six months. At three months, 94 babies were successfully delivered, with eight requiring PPV; at six months, another 117 babies were successfully delivered, with 11 requiring PPV.

“We learned that when we equip one nurse with knowledge, they empower many,” Hadi said.



Ihle is Newest Addition to School of Nursing Faculty



Allison Ihle, PhD, RN, FAAN

After serving as an assistant professor at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio School of Nursing, Dr. Allison Ihle is returning to UT Austin, where she completed her post-doctoral fellowship program.

Between that time, Ihle has kept busy. She was recognized as one of the Texas Nurses Association Outstanding 25 Nurses in Texas in 2025 and received the UT San Antonio Presidential Junior Research Scholar Award (2026) for outstanding early-career research contributions.

Ihle just wrapped up her supplement award from a national R01 grant that dealt with contexts that may influence health outcomes and needs of childbearing women and their children on probation.

The original grant had been awarded to Dr. Rebecca Schlafer of the University of Minnesota, a renowned scholar who focuses on enhanced perinatal programs for incarcerated women across eight different states. Ihle began collaborating with Schlafer as a PhD student in 2019

and later applied for the NIH supplement in 2023.

“I took similar aims and research questions to hers and applied them to populations here in Texas,” Ihle said. “I also focused on women who are under community supervision (probation). What people don’t realize is that most women of reproductive age who are pregnant, birthing and/or parenting are prioritized for probation. While probation is less restrictive than being incarcerated in a prison system, it comes with a lot of social and economic barriers.”

Ihle, PhD, RN, FAAN, said there are requirements for people on probation, such as paying restitution, which can cost several hundred dollars a month. In Texas, probationers are required to get a job within a month of getting out of incarceration.

“The School of Nursing’s strengths in digital health and technology, including work led by Dean Kavita Radhakrishnan, made UT an especially strong fit for my research.”

— Dr. Allison Ihle

“That might be hard when you consider someone who might be pregnant or postpartum, or someone who may have young children,” she said.

Most of the offenses in the group that Ihle studied were related to poverty, including petty theft, prostitution and substance use. Often, the women were sent back to prison after technical violations such as not being able to find a job. It can end up being a vicious cycle, Ihle said.

“I essentially just wanted to see what the needs and perinatal outcomes are of women on community supervision,” Ihle said. “Out of the 1.2 million women who are in the criminal legal system, 808,000 are put on probation, and despite that

large number, we don’t have good data on their pregnancies or perinatal outcomes.”

Over the course of two years, Ihle sampled 60 women and 13 officers to see what the needs and outcomes were for this population. She examined health care, mental health, adverse childhood experiences, violence during pregnancy and sexual health behaviors.

Ihle is in the process of applying for a new R01 grant that would follow the women surveyed six months after giving birth into the post-partum period.

The new grant isn’t all that Ihle is working on.

“We have an AI mobile app, using an AI chatbot that we have trained to give time-sensitive feedback to women who are hard to reach,” Ihle said. “They are usually transient in the criminal legal system and the app will help them with



Paulhill Uses Archer Fellowship to Gain Insight on Policymaking in D.C.

Merci Paulhill had high hopes for her Graduate Archer Fellowship in Washington, D.C., and she wasn't disappointed.

"Washington has been an adventure, honestly," said Paulhill, who graduated from the School of Nursing with a BSN in 2022. "I had my expectations going in. I knew things move fast in the heart of our nation. Now, having lived here for some time, I'm finally getting a feel for how the city operates both logistically and legislatively."

Paulhill, from Conroe, is a third-year student in the PhD program, expecting to graduate in 2028. Her dissertation is titled, "Adoption and Adherence Behaviors towards Treatment Interventions in Adults with Interstitial Lung Disease," which was inspired by a close family member with the same illness.

The Graduate Archer Fellowship is a highly selective UT System-wide program open to students across disciplines. Fellows arrive with varying levels of public-policy experience but share an interest in understanding the policymaking process through the lens of their academic fields. Students live and study in Washington, D.C., gaining firsthand exposure to federal policymaking and engaging directly with legislators and policy professionals.

"We take classes on policy development and history, as well as participate in internships with organizations of our choosing that closely align with what we're studying in our home institutions," said Paulhill, who worked with the American Nurses Association (ANA). She was one of only two nurses selected for the Archer Fellowship this year and the only fellow from the School of Nursing.

"Recognizing that there's a nursing workforce shortage, we have to consider how financial barriers that prevent students from completing their programs also prevent them from entering the workforce."

— Merci Paulhill

"I see this as an opportunity for nurses to enter the policy arena and recognize that we have valuable expertise and stories to share," she said. "My goal is to take the experiences I've gained here, bring them back to my institution, and encourage other nurses to get involved in policy and government advocacy, as well."

But this summer wasn't only about work. Paulhill also experienced Washington's history beyond the classroom.

"D.C. is a beautiful city with such a deep history that's important to acknowledge," Paulhill said.

During the final week of her fellowship, her peers selected her to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery.

While in Washington, Paulhill met with representatives from the offices of U.S. Senators Ted Cruz and John Cornyn, as well as Rep. Greg Casar. She also met Rep. Lauren Underwood of Illinois, herself a registered nurse.

"Even though she's involved in numerous legislative and advocacy efforts, she has never forgotten her nursing roots and has continued to champion the voice nurses bring to policymaking," Paulhill said of Underwood. "She has great ideas of how we, as a discipline, can establish a stronger presence in government. Her journey is a great source of inspiration for me."

Some of the issues that Paulhill discussed with legislators included workplace violence prevention against nurses and how nursing's classification as a professional degree impacts student loans.

"Recognizing that there's a nursing workforce shortage, we have to consider how financial barriers that prevent students from completing their programs



Merci Paulhill poses in front of the U.S. Supreme Court Building.



Merci Paulhill at the wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier during her visit to Arlington National Cemetery. She was deeply humbled to represent the Archer Program and UT System in commemorating the sacrifice of the men and women who have served our country.

also prevent them from entering the workforce," she said.

Paulhill has worked as a registered nurse in the operating room since graduating. She was curious why hospitals have certain procedures in place in their operation, which is one reason why she wanted to do the fellowship.

"I wanted to peel back the curtain and get my PhD to become a source of knowledge and help inform the work being done while I continued serving as a staff nurse," she said.

Getting her PhD will open many avenues for Paulhill as her career advances – such as teaching or research – or even

non-academic routes.

"Policy is one of those nonacademic routes that I've really grown to enjoy," she said. "I think it's very difficult to enter, and it's a path that's still lightly trodden. That's why I'm grateful whenever I find a health policy nurse I can look to for guidance. At the same time, I've been fortunate thus far to have a strong support system of professors at the school who have helped me develop the foundation to become a thoughtful and rigorous researcher."

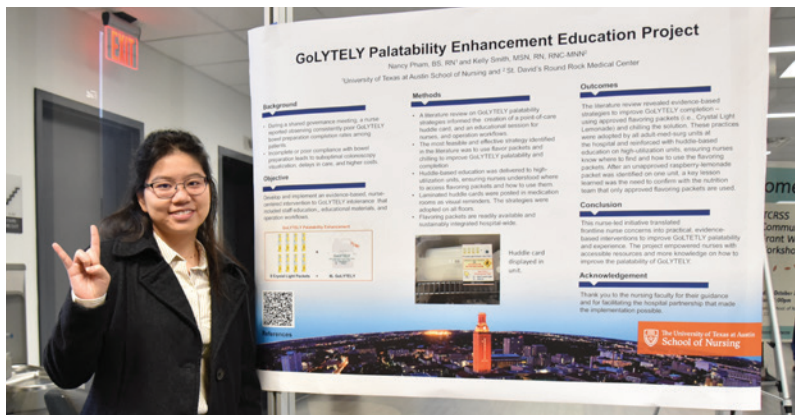
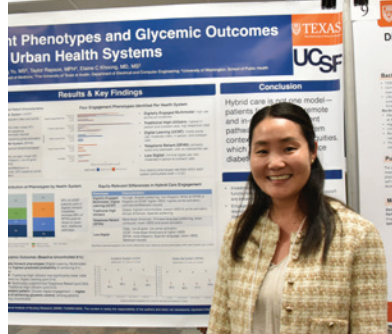
Does that mean we could be seeing the future Congresswoman Paulhill?

"Congresswoman Paulhill. Now, wouldn't that be something," she said with a chuckle.





A YEAR IN PHOTOS



Gerontological Center Provides Continuing Education to Caregivers Across Texas



As the United States marks 250 years, another milestone is reshaping the nation: Americans themselves are growing older. The country's population of older adults is expanding rapidly, bringing new urgency to how communities prepare for and provide their care. Across Texas, caregivers are navigating those challenges every day.

More than 57.8 million Americans are aged 65 and older, a number projected to increase to nearly 81 million by 2040. Adults over age 80 represent the fastest-growing segment of the population. In Texas, there were about 4.36 million Texans aged 65 or older in 2024, representing about 14% of the state's population.

Jacki Hecht, MSN, RN, is personally connected to those stats and sees it every day as the project coordinator for the Luci Baines Johnson and Ian J. Turpin Center for Gerontological Nursing at UT Austin.

"Our population is aging, my mom is aging, I'm aging, so there's a growing awareness of how do we help people thrive through the aging process," Hecht said. "Historically, we respected and looked up to our elders, but more recently, aging has become stigmatized. Nowadays, once people get past a cer-

tain age, they get cast aside. Wisdom and experience don't always get acknowledged."

Hecht's focus has been on a specific project, which provides continuing healthcare education for providers working in long-term care.

"We focus more on best practices in nursing homes," Hecht said. "It's about good, resident-centered clinical care to managing nursing homes."

The Center received a grant to provide free online courses. To date, the Center has served more than 6,000 long-term care providers.

"One of our main initiatives is to offer continuing education for nurses, certified nursing assistants and long-term care administrators, to help them stay updated on various aspects of quality patient care," Hecht said. "All of these courses are online at no charge. Nurses and other healthcare providers can take our courses for continuing education credit, which is needed for them to renew their licensure. It also helps them stay up to date on guidelines and proper procedures on topics like infection control, managing antibiotics and reducing antipsychotic drug use."

Hecht said there are a growing number of School of Nursing students who are showing an interest in working with aging patients. Students are interested

"All of these courses are online at no charge. Nurses and other healthcare providers can take our courses for continuing education credit, which is needed for them to renew their licensure. It also helps them stay up to date on guidelines and proper procedures on topics like infection control, managing antibiotics and reducing antipsychotic drug use."

— Jacki Hecht

in going out to practice in the community and getting and receiving quality mentorship in working with older adults.

"The more quality opportunities we can create for students to work with older adults in the community, the more interest they'll have in working with this important population," she said.

The Luci Baines Johnson and Ian J. Turpin Center for Gerontological Nursing, helmed by Drs. Jung Kwak and Gayle Timmerman, helps ensure they don't have to navigate them without the latest knowledge, resources and training.



Hall of Famer STTI Awards Yoder Its Highest Honor

Dr. Linda Yoder is the first to admit that she never could have predicted where her nursing career would take her.

"Absolutely not!" Yoder said with a chuckle. "I was an Army nurse, and I never thought I'd be doing that for 28 years. I didn't think I'd get three master's degrees and a PhD. My focus was on doing excellent work in caring for people in the service."

But Yoder, PhD, MBA, RN, AOCN-emerita, FAMS, FAAN, took advantage of the opportunities presented to her and excelled at them. Over the summer, Dr. Yoder was inducted into the Sigma Theta Tau International Nurse Researcher Hall of Fame, one of the highest international honors in the profession.

"I'm thrilled to have received the award because it represents the culmination of my career as a nurse scientist," she said. "It was really wonderful getting to know my peers at that level. It was a wonderful moment."

Former Dean Alexa Stuijbergen recommended Yoder for the honor.

"Dr. Yoder's induction into the Sigma International Researcher Hall of Fame recognizes her as an outstanding nurse scientist, scholar and clinician," Stuijbergen said. "Her ongoing research regarding nursing work environment issues, evidence-based practice and quality improvement initiatives reflect her creativity and commitment to improving the healthcare system, not only in the United States but internationally as well."

Born in Germany to a father who was a Vietnam veteran, Yoder didn't learn English until around age 6. Her specialty as an Army nurse was in oncology and bone marrow transplants. With the Army's assistance, she earned her MSN and then she used GI Bill benefits to earn an MBA for a specific reason — "I wanted to get the business acumen to fight for resources needed by nurses," she said.

She was also dissatisfied with nursing literature at the time — more academic than practical, she said.

"Dr. Yoder's research career is built on a 28-year career of service in the military as an Army Nurse Corps Officer where research projects are dictated by the needs of the organization."

— Alexa Stuijbergen

"I would read a lot, but I found it very lacking, very ivory tower," Yoder said. "I couldn't use much of it to improve patient care. We needed more nursing science materials that focused on patient care."

While serving as a major, Yoder applied for Army resources to earn her doctorate. Normally, she said, the Army didn't encourage nurses of her rank to get a PhD, but the Army Nurse Corps awarded her the funding, provided that she finished the

work in three years. She was accepted to the University of Pennsylvania and earned her doctorate.

When she returned to the Army, she built two bone marrow transplant units in San Antonio, and after being promoted to lieutenant colonel, she moved into the research and administrative side of nursing.

"Dr. Yoder's research career is built on a 28-year career of service in the military as an Army Nurse Corps Officer where research projects are dictated by the needs of the organization," Stuijbergen said. "As one of the best educated and most productive nurse scientists in the military, Dr. Yoder was selected to mentor numerous officers during her time in the military and during her academic career at UT Austin."

Yoder helped develop the nursing research service at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio and wrote numerous grants while developing junior nurse scientists.

"By the time I left, it was one of the most prolific research services in the Army Nurse Corps," she said.

After she retired from the Army, she worked at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), where she directed and engaged in nursing research.

She was subsequently recruited by then-Dean Sands to come to the School of Nursing, where she has served for 17 years on the tenure track as an associate professor and later as a full professor. She was granted emeritus status when she retired.

"I'm still working with military nurses," she said. "My former military PhD students came here to work with me. They know that I knew what they would need to accomplish to graduate with a PhD in three years."



Dr. Linda Yoder at the Sigma Theta Tau Conference.

Faculty-Developed AI Tools Transform Teaching and Learning

The Center for Healthcare Innovation and Technology Advancements (CHITA) is helping the School of Nursing facilitate AI work



Computer programmers bring the technical expertise to develop new AI applications, while School of Nursing faculty contribute essential knowledge of teaching, clinical practice and research—even when they do not have technical backgrounds. During her tenure as director of the Center for Healthcare Innovation and Technology Advancements (CHITA), Bo Xie, PhD, FGSA, helped bring these perspectives together.

“My role is to provide a service where we’re building an AI infrastructure for the School of Nursing,” said Xie, who holds the Lee and Joseph D. Jamail Endowed Professorship in Nursing. “It’s a chance for our faculty to work collaboratively with AI-powered tools in their teaching and practice and their research, of course.”

CHITA started in the spring of 2025 and issued a challenge to the nursing faculty – help create AI tools that would impact their classes. In less than one year, by the spring of 2026, two nursing school faculty who took up the challenge – Amanda Alvarado, DNP, CPNP-AC, and Adam Blank, MSN, RN – already have fully deployed AI tools to assist their students.

Alvarado, a clinical assistant professor and program director for the Acute Care Pediatric Nurse Practitioner program, wanted an AI bot that could play the part of a patient for students to diagnose. The idea behind the program is to

“None of the companies that we found are letting faculty design their own simulations,” she said. “What we’re able to do is to give faculty the ability to make the simulations applicable to their classes and what their specific learning outcomes are, which are different from the boilerplate ones you get from a traditional online group.”

– Dr. Amanda Alvarado

ease students into patient interactions, she said.

“I wanted to make a simulation chatbot for my students,” Alvarado said. “Bo had a graduate research assistant who was a computer science master’s student who partnered with me and created my dream program for my students. What we created was an online simulation platform where students could interact with patients who are created by their professors



Dr. Amanda Alvarado

The screenshot displays the HAPINES AI-powered nursing education interface. It shows an assignment review for a case titled "The Feverish Toddler". The interface is divided into several sections: a chat window on the left showing a patient's story, a summary of the case in the center, and a rubric for evaluation on the right. The chat window shows a patient named Emma who has a fever and a rash. The summary section shows the patient's vital signs and a list of symptoms. The rubric section shows the evaluation criteria for the case, including domains like "Knowledge for Nursing Practice" and "Person-Centered Care".

Example of the diagnostic AI tool used and developed by the team.

to meet the learning outcomes.”

For example, Alvarado’s students had to interact with “Marcus,” a fictional 4-year-old boy portrayed by the AI so they could figure out the diagnosis of appendicitis. The program is set up so that the students talk to the patient to get symptoms and history, then write up their differential diagnosis. Alvarado can then grade the assignment.

Alvarado said there’s also a practice mode for students who need a little extra help where they can get automated AI feedback based on the course instructor’s rubric.

Alvarado’s work in AI also earned her a \$459,840 grant from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board through the Nursing Innovation Grant Program (NIGP).

Blank, MSN, a clinical instructor, has a different sort of AI in his classroom.

“What it does is it aids us in taking dictation from student observations while they are working with patients in a clinical environment,” he said. “It allows us to toggle through the 10-12 students we’re working with per day and take very detailed notes on their behaviors. We use different rubrics which are AI prompts to reduce the

dictated notes into actionable, organized feedback and give it to the students.”

Blank estimated the app can save nearly 50 percent of the time required to analyze notes and return them to the students. In the spring of 2026, there were six faculty members in five different classes using the tool to collect data, and to aggregate and disseminate back to the students.

Both Blank and Alvarado said the initial results from the AI bots have been very encouraging.

“It helps the students get granular detail into what they’ve been doing and helps us guide them better, and it helps them also see their own growth,” Blank said.

Alvarado said that despite the number of AI companies in the world creating programs, none came close to CHITA in providing what she needs in the classroom.

“None of the companies that we found are letting faculty design their own simulations,” she said. “What we’re able to do is to give faculty the ability to make the simulations applicable to their classes and what their specific learning outcomes are, which are different from the boilerplate ones you get from a traditional online group.”



DR. JOHN LOWE:

LOWE'S NIH-FUNDED RESEARCH ADVANCES INDIGENOUS HEALTH

With two National Institutes of Health (NIH) grants supporting his work, Dr. John Lowe — the holder of the Joseph H. Blades Centennial Memorial Professorship in Nursing — is expanding the reach and impact of his research.

The first is an NIH UH3 grant that studies the impact of a talking circle intervention among Indigenous populations that Lowe, PhD, RN, FIAAN, FAAN, has developed and studied for several years. The program focuses on promoting the emotional, mental and behavioral health of youth. The current study is being implemented in collaboration with the American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Mission in San Antonio.

"The intervention is delivered over 10 weeks, with one session per week delivered in the format of a talking circle," said Lowe, himself a member of the Echota Cherokee and Lenape nations. "The topics are culturally tailored for youth — fourth, fifth and sixth graders guided by a manual."

The NIH developed the funding mechanism to support projects like this due to the increased need for emotional, mental and behavioral health support among youth after the COVID-19 pandemic. The Talking Circle program is one of three evidence-based programs funded in the country and the only one to focus on Native Americans/Indigenous youth.

The second study is funded by an R01 grant that is focusing on an intervention for the prevention of noise-induced hearing loss among Indigenous adults, Lowe said. It marks the first time

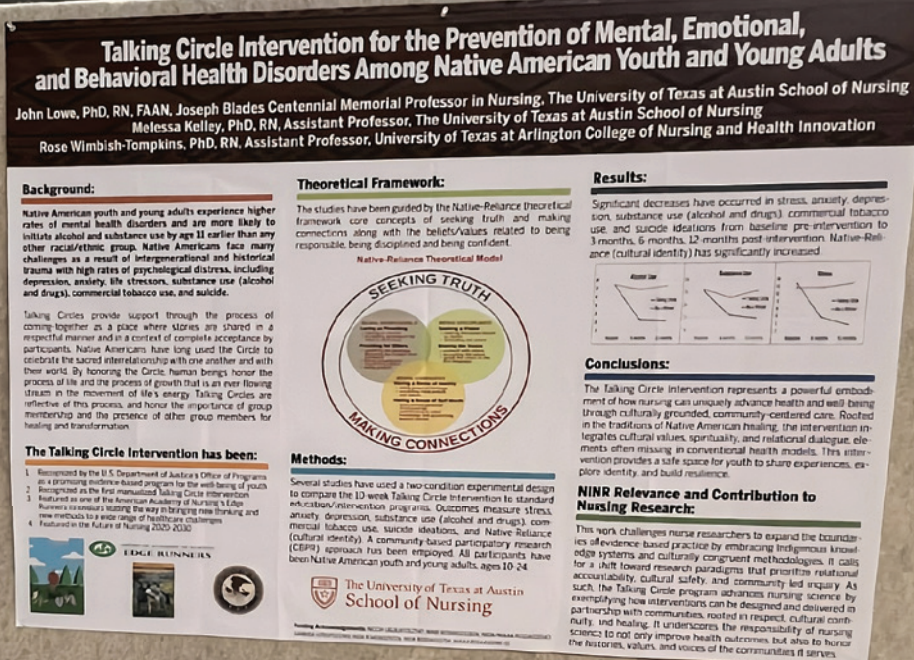
that this intervention is being studied among adult Indigenous people.

Lowe is working with Dr. OiSaeng Hong of the University of California, San Francisco, who has studied hearing loss prevention among other populations.

Lowe isn't done with grants, either. He's working with two other faculty members on NIH grants and has submitted a new P20 center grant in collaboration with Dean Kavita Radhakrishnan. The center will provide faculty with opportunities to develop research expertise in conducting studies among Indigenous populations.

Lowe said while the faculty may apply for grants, nursing students also see great benefits when they are awarded.

"It's always beneficial to be able to bring the focus of the grant into the classroom," he said. "I facilitate for students an immersion experience within Native American communities once a year. We also developed and implemented a postdoctoral fellowship program, the Indigenous Nursing Research Enhancement (INRE), that provided early-career nursing faculty with mentorship along with support for a pilot research project conducted with Native American populations. This innovative post-doctoral fellowship program allowed the fellows to remain in their faculty positions at the universities where they were employed. They received intensive mentorship sessions and immersion experiences along with support to present their research at conferences nationally and internationally."



Hitting the Right Notes

Dr. Carolyn Phillips uses music to help persons with multiple sclerosis (MS)

Assistant Professor Carolyn Phillips, PhD, RN, ACNP, AOCNP, has been able to combine two passions into an R21 grant awarded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) — nursing and the ukulele.

If the latter seems a little incongruent with an NIH grant, Phillips' study of how the instrument can help persons with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) certainly isn't.

The study is a 12-week online video intervention series that teaches the ukulele to patients reporting difficulties with cognitive function. Phillips, who plays the ukulele, said it's a relatively inexpensive instrument that's small to hold and has only four strings — making it ideal for the research.

"It's very accessible," Phillips said. "You only need one finger to hold down a string to play a number of different chords. The patients don't need musical training; in fact, it's probably better if they don't have musical training."

Many traditional interventions for cognitive problems for persons with MS involve speech and visual displays, but Phillips said the advantage of playing a musical instrument is that it requires intricate coordination and communication among multiple sensory systems (visual, auditory, tactile) and motor functions at the same time.

"We're trying to hit that mix where you're challenging your brain just enough to try to improve your cognitive abilities, but not too much so as to be overwhelming," Phillips said.

Just as a patient doesn't have to be athletic to engage in physical therapy, neither does the patient need to be musical to use music as a health tool. Phillips' study differentiates itself because most musical-based research for people with MS uses music passively — patients listen to music but don't engage with an instrument.

"With our study, they're learning to play the instrument, which challenges their cognitive abilities," she said. "As individuals read and translate musical notes into physical actions, it challenges their dexterity and coordination while simultaneously receiving feedback from their auditory system."

In our preliminary studies, in addition to improvements in cognitive flexibility, people reported having better hand dexterity by playing the ukulele. That's something we're exploring."

Phillips said she's working with several UT nursing and pre-med students, training them to work on the coaching calls — including teaching them the ukulele — as well as teaching them about the challenges persons with MS face.

Currently, the study focuses on persons with MS, but Phillips hopes to extend it into other populations in the future.

Empowering Nurses for Impact:

COVID-19 Set Dr. Nnaka on New Career Path

When COVID-19 emerged in 2020, it altered the course of countless lives and careers.

It certainly changed Dr. Tonychris Nnaka's – but not in the way one might have guessed.

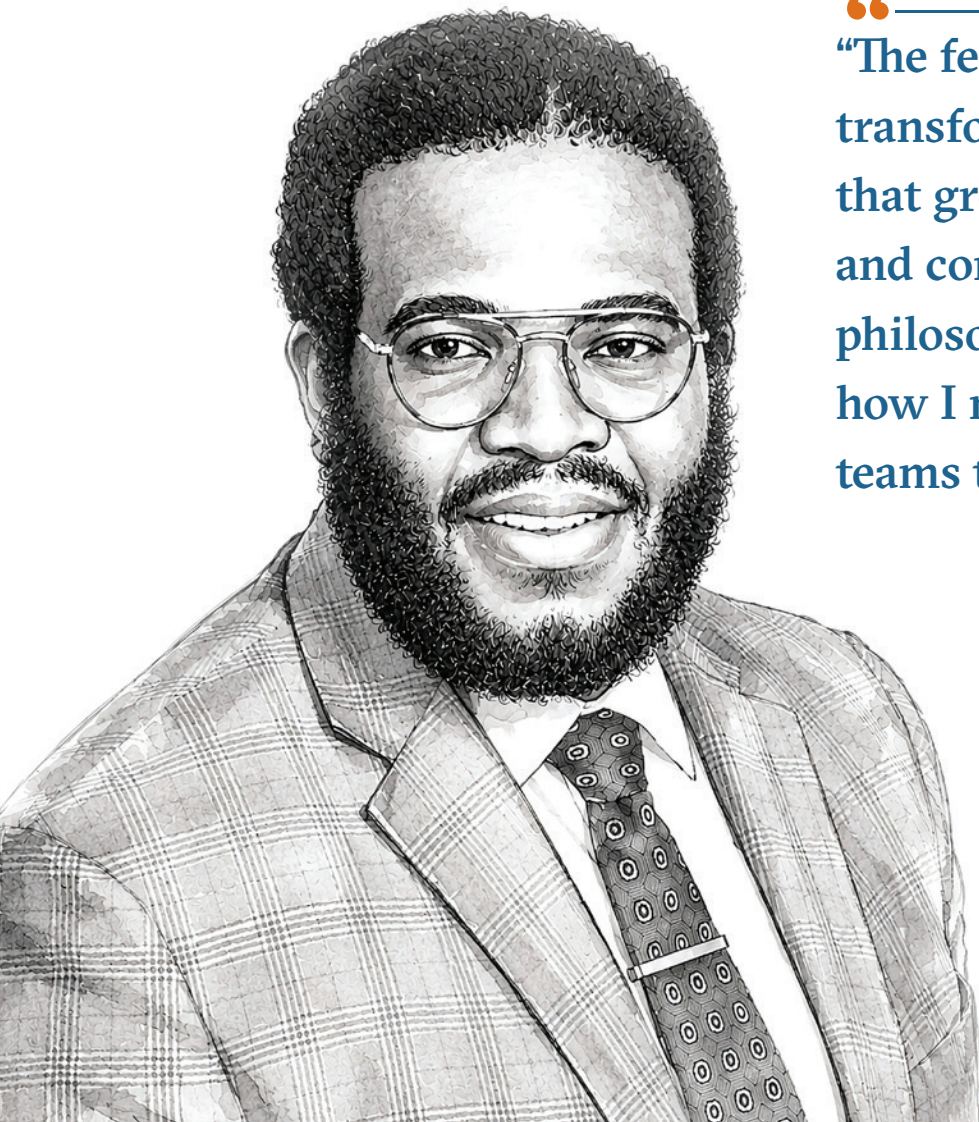
Originally from Nigeria, Nnaka immigrated to the United States and built his career through nursing, public health and research. While

pursuing his PhD at The University of Texas at Austin, he was simultaneously working at Parkland Health in Dallas when the health system admitted its first COVID-19 patient in March 2020.

"There were very few nurses that volunteered – just about five of us initially," said Nnaka, PhD, MPH, RN, CPH, FAAN. "I recognized the significance of the emerging COVID-19 crisis. When I volunteered to serve on the frontline during the earliest days of the pandemic, we didn't know it was going to shut down the entire world. One month into that, COVID-19 blew up."

"The feedback culture at UT was transformative, it taught me that growth requires humility and continuous learning. That philosophy continues to shape how I mentor students and lead teams today."

— Dr. Tonychris Nnaka



His background in epidemiology, public health and nursing positioned him to help lead clinical operations during an unprecedented period of uncertainty. As the pandemic intensified, he advanced into clinical leadership and later served as a health policy advisor to the City of Dallas, helping inform community responses during the vaccine rollout.

At Parkland, it usually takes several years to get elevated to clinical manager, but Nnaka had only been there for a couple of years before his promotion.

"COVID changed my professional trajectory," Nnaka said. "It placed me in a frontline clinical leadership role at one of the largest safety-net hospitals and Level I trauma centers in the nation, at the intersection of clinical care, leadership, public health and policy during one of the most consequential moments in modern healthcare. While serving in that role, I was recruited by the office of Mayor Eric Johnson, where I served as a Health Policy Advisor to the Mayor. This was during the period when COVID-19 vaccines were becoming available, and I contributed to citywide efforts to increase vaccine access and uptake, particularly among communities that needed it most."

At UT Austin, Nnaka completed his doctoral training as both a Jonas Scholar and an NIH-funded T32 Predoctoral Fellow. He credits the university with strengthening his commitment to lifelong learning, mentorship and academic excellence.

"The feedback culture at UT was transformative," he said. "It taught me that growth requires humility and continuous learning. That philosophy continues to shape how I mentor students and lead teams today."

Following graduation, Nnaka completed post-doctoral training at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth, where he further developed his expertise in digital health, behavioral science and technology-en-

abled healthcare innovation. Although the pandemic left many healthcare professionals exhausted, it also reaffirmed his passion for advancing health through research, education and innovation.

"That's what I've loved," Nnaka said. "I've done research since I was an undergrad. It's something that was natural. I don't think nursing is exclusive to clinical. I think the science and art of nursing is all together."

Today, Nnaka serves as the Associate Vice President for Health Research and Innovation and inaugural Executive Director of the Health Research and Innovation Center at the University of North Texas Health Science Center in Fort Worth. Prior to that, he served as the Founding Associate Dean for Research at the College of Nursing, where he helped build the college's research infrastructure and advance its research mission.

"We've been here three years and have grown our research infrastructure and portfolio extensively," he said. "I lead the effort in preparing the next generation of clinicians and scientists within my college, so I never really left clinical care. It's all together."

During his time at UT Austin, the School of Nursing's personal-touch approach had a major impact on how he approaches research and teaching in his current role.

Nnaka said he maintains relationships with several UT profes-

sors as his network of support.

"They transformed my life," he said. "They paid attention to my trajectory and opened doors. They mentioned my name in rooms where I probably wasn't."

The late Miyong Kim was a particularly impactful mentor for Nnaka, especially since she was at the forefront of using technology to improve nursing.

"What we're doing now, she was thinking about it 10 years ago," Nnaka said. "That's how advanced she was. That blend of visionary mentorship and genuine friendship is unmatched."

"They transformed my life," he said. "They paid attention to my trajectory and opened doors. They mentioned my name in rooms where I probably wasn't."

— Dr. Tonychris Nnaka



Leading the Way School of Nursing Grad Applying What She Learned to Take on Leadership Responsibilities

Brianna Garza once spent a day while a student at the School of Nursing shadowing a nurse manager at Ascension Seton hospital. It ended up inspiring her to pursue a career in management.

"She was very honest with me and we talked informally about what was going on and what it takes to be a leader," Garza said. "I loved it. I still email her. It drew me to leadership, actually."

Garza already had an impressive list of achievements when she graduated from the School of Nursing as an honors student in 2023. Since then, she has gone on to earn her master's degree at Duke University, where she is now studying to complete her DNP. Garza eventually wants to work in nursing leadership and be a mentor to the next generation of nurses.

"I used to say when I was first in school that I want to be a chief nursing officer," Garza said. "As I've learned, I don't want to chase a title; I want to make a large impact on healthcare in our area. (My doctorate) is in nursing and healthcare leadership. I am now a clinical quality nurse for UT Health, a network of clinics with a surgical center and new hospital on the way. I'll see where this takes me."

Garza is able to work on her doctorate remotely while she works daily at UT Health in quality care. As part of her studies, she must spend 160 hours working on an administrative project with a preceptor.

She said it was her mentors at UT, such as Dr. Li-Chen Lin and Dr. Vinh Nguyen, that inspired her to pursue a leadership role in nursing.

"I love the people side of things," she said. "Nurses have a unique ability to understand people—even what they communicate without words."

“I want to make a large impact on healthcare in our area.”

— Brianna Garza

In 2023, Garza delivered a paper titled "Self-Concept Levels Among Pre-Licensure Nursing Students" at the International Council of Nurses Conference. Her paper demonstrated that certain factors may be associated with giving nurses a positive self-concept, which leads to greater self-confidence and greater resilience when facing burnout and compassion fatigue.

The idea of self-concept goes back to when Garza became a nurse extern in neuroscience at St. David's Hospital. She then became a Neurosciences ICU RN at UT Southwestern.

"We talked about self-concept during a class," she said. "I just chose it

because I thought it would be interesting. I didn't know it would be such a great project that was so relevant by the time I actually published it. It was fate. I also mentored a lot of nursing students, so I liked to bring up self-concept. I wanted to mentor students to say, 'Yes, grades are important, but also take care of yourself and look at why you want to do (this).'"

Garza will need about two more years before she finishes her doctorate.

"I definitely want to stay in the UT system," she said. "Whether it's Dallas or Houston or Austin, I love how connected we all are. We work to make each other better."



School of Nursing Trio Among Outstanding 25 Nurses in Texas

The School of Nursing hit the trifecta this year when three of its faculty and staff were named among Outstanding 25 Texas Nurses for 2026 by the Texas Nurses Association (TNA). Jacki Hecht, Verónica García Walker and Julie Zuñiga received the honor in May, when the TNA selected them from more than 240 submissions.



Jacki Hecht

Jacki Hecht started out as a nutrition science major and worked with children as a nutritionist and then as a nurse before moving into gerontology. She's now the Project Coordinator of the Johnson-Turpin Center for Gerontological Nursing.

"As a nutritionist working in a Children's Hospital, I saw that it was the nurses who were the leaders in caring for the children and their families," said Hecht, MSN, RN. "I got inspired and thought, 'That's what I want to do.'"

Hecht's research and practice focus on motivating health behavior change and improving nursing home experiences. "Our population is aging," she said. "How do we help people to live well and thrive as they progress through the aging process?"

Hecht noted that nowadays, aging is often stigmatized, and that our society doesn't honor the wisdom and experience an older generation might have.

"There's a lot we can do to help aging people live enriching and meaningful lives," she said.

Hecht said it was a great honor to be selected by the TNA for the achievement.

"I've been a nurse for almost 40 years, and it's very gratifying and rewarding to be recognized by my peers," she said. "It validates the work I've been doing."



Verónica García Walker

Dr. Ronnie García Walker said she was very engaged in her research when she learned that she had been selected for the TNA award.

"It's an honor to be chosen," said García Walker, PhD, RN, CNE. "You are simply doing the work you love and are grateful that it has been recognized."

García Walker, who serves as the director of the Center for Professional Development and Scholarship, is completing her first NIH-funded research study, which focuses on the perceptions and experiences of women diagnosed with schizophrenia spectrum disorders who live in long-term care settings.

Specifically, the study examines their perceptions of social connectedness. García Walker said she asks the women to describe their experiences of social connectedness when they were younger and now, while they are in long-term care.

She then asks the women if they have ideas about how they could better connect socially with others while living in a nursing home.

"I want to know what their ideas are. We are working together to co-create important future interventions to combat loneliness and promote social connectedness in women diagnosed with schizophrenia spectrum disorders."

She has worked with 100 women in 30 nursing homes in Texas.



Julie Zuñiga

As a native Texan who started her nursing career in Austin at the county hospital, Dr. Julie Zuñiga found recognition from the Texas Nurses Association especially gratifying.

"It's a huge honor to be recognized when we have so many amazing nurses in the state," said Zuñiga, PhD, RN, FAAN.

Zuñiga's research on chronic disease management, including diabetes, has crossed international borders into Kenya and Mexico. Currently, she's working with a team on diabetes management in rural Mexico.

"The intervention is working pretty well," she said. "Community health workers are conducting home visits and providing education. Diabetes is really hard to manage there; they don't have a lot of access to care, and the community is really motivated to improve and change their health. It's a pretty exciting project."

In the U.S., Zuñiga works with technology like Continuous Glucose Monitors (CGM) to obtain data and monitor glucose levels in diabetics. Zuñiga's father was pre-diabetic for years and recently developed diabetes. He already has neuropathy in his feet.

"I'm not sure if we're intervening early enough," she said. "We're trying to decrease the stress in people's bodies earlier and younger, and not necessarily with medications. We're trying to get people to walk, using their large muscles, making some changes in their diets, decreasing carbs, that kind of thing."

Zuñiga said the three nurses selected by TNA represent the quality of the faculty and professional staff at the School of Nursing.

A Future Nurse's Hands-On Approach to Nursing

For all her life, Minyoung “Christine” Kim can’t remember a time when she wasn’t doing something with her hands.

Art. Legos. Playing the double bass as a member of the All-State orchestra in high school.

However, while there are few professions as hands-on as nursing, it wasn’t the career path the junior from College Station had ever considered.

But looking for something to work on over the summer of her senior year of high school, Kim decided to attend what was then the inaugural year of the Longhorn Nursing Immersion Summer Camp.

“I didn’t really have nursing as an option when I was going through my college applications,” Kim said. “Honestly, I didn’t know what career path I wanted to pursue. Then I had the chance to attend the Longhorn Nursing Camp. I found out I really loved nursing. The professors and faculty and the mentors who were seniors, they were really nice and they helped guide me through the expectations of this program and what nursing really looks like.”

Since coming to UT Austin, Kim has excelled in the nursing program. Last spring, she was one of 11 students nationally selected for the American Nurses Foundation Scholarship, which supports students who demonstrate exceptional commitment to nursing, leadership and a clear dedication to advancing patient-centered care.

Kim said she would like to work in either a cardiovascular or a surgical ICU, but first plans to go to graduate school, with the option of becoming a nurse practitioner or a certified registered nurse anesthetist.

Dr. Carolyn Phillips, PhD, RN, ACNP, AOCNP, serves as Kim’s mentor and faculty advisor in the honors program. Both Phillips and Kim share a love of music that is a key part of their research.

“She’s an excellent student, and I’ve been able to mentor her on her research

project,” Phillips said. “I found her to be very bright, curious and thoughtful. She asks good questions, not only about the study, but why something matters, how to look at research questions more scientifically. What impressed me most is the initiative she has shown in developing her project.”

Kim is researching college students who use music to counter stress. Kim

hopes the findings will support the use of music to help people cope with autoimmune diseases. In addition, Kim will work as a research assistant at Phillips’ National Institutes of Health-funded study involving using the ukulele to help patients with multiple sclerosis.

“I really like music,” said Kim, who also is a member of the UT dance team. “It’s a really big part of my life.”

“She was very connected to alumni. She was a natural leader and a living legend. This was her passion.”

— Dr. Alexa Stuijbergen

Billye Brown: A LEGACY IN NURSING

Brown’s Influence Still Felt at School of Nursing with Newly Endowed Chair

It’s been just over a year since Dean Emerita Billye J. Brown’s passing, but her legacy continues to live on at the School of Nursing.

The school announced the endowment of the Billye J. Brown Chair in Nursing Leadership, created by her estate to be used to recruit, retain and support senior faculty for the School of Nursing at the discretion of the dean. Distributions shall be used to support the holder and the holder’s activities.

Brown, EdD, RN, FAAN, served with the School of Nursing from 1972 until her retirement in 1989. She became its first dean in 1976.

“The Billye Brown Chair honors a visionary leader whose impact is woven into the fabric of our School,” said Dean Kavita Radhakrishnan, PhD, MSEE, RN, FAAN, FAHA. “Bearing her name, this chair carries Dean Brown’s legacy forward while investing in the leadership, scholarship and innovation that will shape the future of nursing.”

For Brown’s friends and family, the chair provides a lasting legacy to her work.

Dan Dipert, Brown’s nephew, said education was always paramount in the family.

“When she ended up at The University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing, you can’t imagine how proud our family was of her,” he said. “During the last 25 or 30 years, Billye had always wanted that chair but couldn’t develop the funds. About 10 years ago, she started talking about using her es-

tate to fund the chair. It’s my honor to carry out her request.”

Dipert and his wife Linda established the Billye J. Brown Endowed Scholarship at The University of Texas at Arlington in her honor. The endowment awards three scholarships each year to nursing students, continuing Brown’s legacy by supporting future healthcare professionals.

Former Dean Alexa Stuijbergen, PhD, RN, FAAN, said she was among the last faculty hires Brown made before her retirement. What struck her most about Brown was the way she connected with students.

“Her leadership helped build the foundation of the School of Nursing through a very challenging time,” said Stuijbergen, the James R. Dougherty Jr. Centennial Professor. “She really had to lead the school through a very difficult transition. She was a great visionary and very strategic. She cared greatly for individuals, and I think she knew all of the students by name.”

Those students often kept in touch with Brown long after they graduated and would often call her up for advice about what direction they should follow in their nursing careers, Stuijbergen said.

“She was very connected to alumni,” Stuijbergen said. “She was a natural leader and a living legend. This was her passion.”

Beyond her influence at the School of Nursing, Brown was also a respected figure outside of Texas. She served as president of the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, the Texas Nurses Association and Sigma Theta Tau International. She also served as an editor of the Journal of Professional Nursing.

Shivers, School of Nursing Continue Partnership with New Endowed Chair

The Foundation is donating \$1.7 million to elevate the Dr. Mary Louise Adams Endowed Professorship in Oncology Nursing to a chair position

The partnership between the School of Nursing and the Shivers Cancer Foundation has been mutually beneficial and fruitful over the years.

The Foundation has funded several endowments that have given School of Nursing students and faculty the opportunity to study and research oncology care.

Now, the Foundation is donating \$1.7 million to elevate the Dr. Mary Louise Adams Endowed Professorship in Oncology Nursing to a chair position.

"The Shivers Cancer Foundation has been an extraordinary partner in advancing oncology nursing at UT Austin," Dean Kavita Radhakrishnan said. "This generous investment in an endowed chair will strengthen our ability to educate future oncology nurses, advance oncology nursing research and improve cancer care for Texans — especially those in underserved communities."

Patricia Young Brown, Executive Director and Board Trustee of the Foundation, said it's a partnership that's benefiting Austin-area residents as well as the region.

"We've been enthusiastic supporters of The University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing for many years," Brown said. "From the Shivers Cancer Foundation perspective, there's still a very large unmet need for oncology care in Travis County. Underserved populations frequently do not have access to care."

Brown said the partnership has evolved into an important research and workforce development effort focused on oncology

care. She said people receiving education regarding healthy living and cancer risk factors, as well as getting screened for early cancer detection are essential to the community, and having trained nurses will only enhance the Foundation's goal of ensuring the existence of these essential practices.

"Our focus has been to help build UT Austin School of Nursing's infrastructure around oncology care," Brown said. "It's been expressed to us that the School's work will culminate in an oncology nursing center. We are very excited about that. That's where our eyes are focused."

Brown said establishing the chair is a major first step in realizing the oncology nursing center.

"We're investing in the future of the School of Nursing," she said. "As the University of Texas Medical Center continues to grow, bringing MD Anderson Cancer Center to Austin, there appears to be an opportunity for more integration. The School of Nursing expressed to us a desire to play a larger role in not only educating nurses for oncology specialization but also becoming a larger part of oncology research."

The Foundation and the School of Nursing originally talked about creating the chair over a longer period of time but decided to move on it as quickly as possible.

"We're very keen on the various dimensions the School of Nursing has grown into over the years that takes it from being not just a leading academic institution but also bringing learning into practice within the community," Brown said.



Marilyn D. Willman, right, was a significant figure in nursing education.

'Visionary': Willman Helped Build Nursing Program across Texas

As the School of Nursing heads into its 50th year on the UT Austin campus, it's important to remember one of its key pioneers.

Marilyn D. Willman, who died in 2021, was one of the most significant figures in nursing education, not only at UT Austin, but also across the state and across the border in Canada.

"So much of the foundation of UT Austin School of Nursing was really initiated under Marilyn's leadership," said Dr. Lorraine Walker, EdD, holder of the Luci B. Johnson Centennial Professorship.

After graduating from the University of Michigan, Willman earned a Master's degree in 1959 from the UT Medical Branch and her Doctorate in Educational Psychology in 1961 from UT Austin.

Willman joined the School of Nursing as a professor, progressing to become President of the UT system-wide Nursing School. As President, she helped transition the School of Nursing from two to six campuses (Austin, El Paso, Fort Worth, Galveston, Houston and San Antonio).

"Marilyn Willman was a visionary leader," said former Dean Alexa Stuifbergen, PhD, RN, FAAN, and the James R. Dougherty

Jr. Centennial Professor. "She led faculty all across the state. She was a major early leader in nursing education, and a charter fellow of the American Academy of Nursing. She was certainly a proponent of improving the educational preparation for nurses — encouraging more nurses to obtain their baccalaureate and graduate degrees and laying the foundation for doctoral education in nursing."

Willman hired faculty such as Walker in a push to get a doctoral program into the state system.

"She led the charge for PhD classes," Walker said. "It was Marilyn's leadership. We became one of the first PhD programs in the United States."

In 1976, the Board of Regents decided to decentralize the system-wide School of Nursing, making each School a unit within an existing UT campus. Willman left the system at that time with the elimination of the President's position.

Willman moved to Canada in 1977 to become a professor and Director at the University of British Columbia School of Nursing, a position she would hold until her retirement in 1993.

Walker said she would like to see more acknowledgements of Willman's contributions to nursing in Texas.

"She was a leader at a time when the school needed a leader," Walker said.



Dr. Mary Louise Adams at the Family Wellness Clinic in the early 2000s.

WHAT STARTS HERE

STARTS WITH YOU

A Decade of Transformational Giving

The School of Nursing raised more than \$73.1 million during The University of Texas at Austin's 10-year "What Starts Here" campaign, nearly tripling its original \$25 million goal.

By comparison, the previous campaign raised \$18.8 million over eight years.

Donors made 6,043 outright gifts and 60 planned gifts, establishing 66 new endowments and increasing the School's endowment portfolio from 95 to 161, a 69% increase over the course of the campaign.

"This campaign exceeded our boldest expectations and reflects an extraordinary belief in the future of nursing," said Dean Kavita Radhakrishnan, PhD, MSEE, RN, FAAN, FAHA. "This phenomenal generosity of our alumni, friends and partners will be transformational, expanding opportunities for our students and faculty, accelerating innovation and discovery and strengthening our ability to improve health and health care for generations to come."

There are more than four million nurses working in the United States, yet federal workforce projections anticipate a shortfall of more than 267,000 full-time registered nurses in 2028, with shortages expected to persist through 2038. Former Dean Alexa Stuijbergen noted that funds raised by the campaign are vital not only to support the School of Nursing, but also to improve the nation's health through education, research and practice. The generous gifts the School of Nursing has received over the decade will help fill the gap in four key areas:

Student Support

Campaign giving generated \$23.4 million for student support. Donors established 38 new student scholarship endowments and 17 graduate fellowship endowments, expanding opportunities for students at all levels, including more support for those pursuing their PhD. This support will help prepare the next generation of nursing leaders, educators and scientists while sustaining the School's standing as one of the nation's leading nursing programs.

Faculty Excellence

Increased funding allows the School of Nursing to recruit and retain outstanding educators, researchers and clinicians. Faculty members have excelled in teaching while conducting research that has benefited Texans and has crossed international borders. During the campaign, donors established 6 new endowed faculty positions, including chairs, professorships and other faculty support endowments.

Program Support

During this campaign, we also secured 5 flexible program support endowments which provide the adaptability needed to meet the School of Nursing's most pressing opportunities and challenges. These funds support students, faculty and academic programs by addressing emerging needs that may not be covered through traditional funding sources, from student success and emergency assistance to faculty research, professional development and programmatic innovation. They also provide critical discretionary resources that allow school leadership to respond strategically to evolving priorities, ensuring continued excellence in education, research and patient care while maximizing impact where it is needed most.

Learning Opportunities

Over the past decade, philanthropic support expanded hands-on learning in the classroom, simulation labs and clinical settings, giving students the skill and judgment they will need in professional practice. Campaign gifts also helped renovate our sturdy 50-year-old building to support team-based learning and provide a healthy, supportive environment for students and faculty.

Community-Based Health Solutions

Generous campaign support has strengthened the School of Nursing's ability to improve health across the lifespan and expand access to care in underserved Central Texas communities.

The Luci Baines Johnson and Ian J. Turpin Center for Gerontological Nursing was established in 2022 with the mission of advancing education, research and community partnerships focused on improving the health, independence and quality of life of older adults and their caregivers.

Gifts also supported the School's Children's Wellness Center and Family Wellness Center. Together, these clinics provide primary care and help patients manage acute and chronic conditions while giving undergraduate and graduate nursing students valuable clinical experience.

Campaign support is also helping the School expand emerging work in oncology care and heart health.

"I could not be prouder of our community for this extraordinary result," said Kimberly Chapman, chair of the School of Nursing Advisory Council. "Our alumni, faculty, staff and friends have displayed incredible generosity and deep commitment to the future of our beloved school. Special recognition goes to Sergio Delgado, the School of Nursing's Chief Development Officer, whose inspiration and tireless efforts have been a driving force behind this remarkable campaign. Together we have demonstrated what is possible when a community truly believes in its mission."

Their investments will continue to strengthen nursing education, research and care across Texas and beyond.



Support the School of Nursing

Contact Chief Development Officer

Sergio Delgado

sdelgado@nursing.utexas.edu

512-694-8751

Longhorn Nursing News

Faculty

Amanda Alvarado, DNP, CPNP-AC, RN-C, clinical assistant professor, received the 2026 Texas Exes James W. Vick Award for Academic Advising. She also received a \$460K grant from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board through the Nursing Innovation Grant Program.

Adam Blank, MSN, RN, clinical instructor, and **Carolyn Phillips**, PhD '19, RN, ACNP, AOCNP, assistant professor, received the Dean's Excellence Award for Research.

Amanda Boardman, DNP '26, MSN '24, BSN '07, APRN, CPNP-PC, clinical assistant professor, joined the School of Nursing in August 2026.

Carol Delville, PhD '08, MSN '03, BSN '01, APRN, ACNS-BC, FCNSI, clinical associate professor, received the 2026 National Association of Clinical Nurse Specialists (NACNS) Clinical Nurse Specialist of the Year Award.

Mariella Gonzalez, MSN, RN, clinical instructor, joined the School of Nursing in August 2026.

Erica Greathouse, MSN, RN, RNC-OB, C-EFM, clinical instructor, joined the School of Nursing in August 2026.

Janice Hernandez, DNP '17, MSN '09, BSN '04, FNP-C, clinical associate professor, received the 2025–26 George W. Jalonick III and Dorothy Cockrell Jalonick Centennial Lectureship award from The University of Texas at Austin.

Shalonda Horton, PhD '15, MSN '06, BSN, was promoted to clinical associate professor.

Allison Ihle, PhD, RN, FAAN, assistant professor, joined the School of Nursing in August 2026.

Shelli Kesler, PhD, was appointed interim associate dean for research.

Stephanie Key, DNP, MSN '99, APRN, CPNP-PC, was promoted to clinical associate professor.

Jung Kwak, PhD, MSW, FGSA, associate professor, was one of only 16 UT Austin faculty awarded a Texas Global Faculty Research Seed Grant for her project, "What Matters to Persons Living with Dementia: A Japan-U.S. Cross-Cultural Comparison of Self-Agency and Relationship Quality."

Yang Li, PhD, RN, assistant professor, was awarded an R01 grant from the National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR) for her research aimed at reducing intimate partner violence and addressing mental health needs among women of Chinese origin. She also received a Rita and Alex Hillman Emergent Innovation (HEI) Program Award.

Li-Chen Lin, PhD '09, RN, CNRN, clinical associate professor, and **Linda Kim**, PhD, MSN, RN, PHN, CPHQ, CGNC, FAAN, associate professor, received the Dean's Excellence Award for Global & Community Nursing.

John Lowe, PhD, RN, FAAN, professor, received the Southern Nursing Research Society (SNRS) Research in Empathetic Care for Populations with Distinct Healthcare Needs Award and was inducted as a Fellow of the International Academy of Addictions Nursing (FIAAN).

Anna Mendoza, DNP '26, BSN '15, RN, was promoted to clinical assistant professor. She also received the Dean's Excellence Mentorship Award.

Shannon Mickelson, MSN, RN, clinical instructor, joined the School of Nursing in August 2026.

Freida Miller, MSN '24, RN, RNC-MNN, CNE, C-EFM, BA '99, clinical instructor, joined the School of Nursing in August 2026.

Nicole Murry, PhD '18, BSN '02, RN, clinical associate professor, and Cara Young, PhD, RN, FNP-C, FAANP, FAAN, associate professor, received the Dean's Excellence Award in Service.

Laura Murphy, PhD, MSN '09, BSN '05, RNC-OB, clinical assistant professor, received The University of Texas at Austin Outstanding Graduate Adviser Award.

Brandi Myers, MSN, RNC-OB, C-EFM, clinical instructor, joined the School of Nursing in August 2026.

Victoria Najm, DNP '26, AGACNP-BC, CCRN-CSC, CPAN, clinical assistant professor, joined the School of Nursing in August 2026.

Nancy Pluviose-Reynolds, MSN, RN, CPN, CPMT, clinical instructor, joined the School of Nursing in August 2026.

Kavita Radhakrishnan, PhD, MSEE, RN, FAAN, FAHA, served as interim dean beginning March 6, 2026, and was named dean effective September 1, 2026.

Alexa Stuijbergen, PhD, RN, FAAN, professor and former dean, received the Southern Nursing Research Society (SNRS) Research in Nursing and Health (RINAH) Authorship Award and also delivered the SNRS keynote speech in February 2026.

Ana Todd, PhD '13, RN, clinical associate professor, was inducted as a 2026 Distinguished Fellow of the National Academies of Practice Nursing Academy (FNAP).

Verónica García Walker, PhD '14, MSN '84, BSN '82, RN, clinical associate professor, was recognized as one of the Texas Nurses Association's Outstanding Texas Nurses for 2026.

Bo Xie, PhD, FGSA, professor, received a National Institutes of Health (NIH) award from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) to support her project titled, "StatWiseAI: An AI-Powered Educational Tool for Enhancing Methodological Rigor in Large-Scale Data Analysis."

Sandra Yaklin, PhD '21, MSN '91, APRN, PMHNP-BC '16, clinical assistant professor, joined the School of Nursing in August 2026.

Linda Yoder, PhD, MBA, RN, AOCN-emerita, FAMSN, FAAN, professor emerita, was inducted into the 2026 Sigma Theta Tau International Nurse Researcher Hall of Fame.

Julie Zuñiga, PhD '13, MSN '06, RN, FAAN, associate professor, was recognized as one of the Texas Nurses Association's Outstanding Texas Nurses for 2026. She and **Eugene Martir**, MSN, BSN '12, RN, CEN, clinical instructor, also received the Dean's Excellence Award for Teaching Innovation.

Staff

DeAnna Baker, senior academic program coordinator, received a Staff Service Award for 10 years of service at UT Austin.

John Bellquist, PhD, editor, received a Staff Service Award for 20 years of service at UT Austin.

Laura Burton, clinical placement coordinator for graduate programs, received the SON Star Award for Texas Nursing staff in May 2026.

Ruperta Chavez, senior office assistant, received a Staff Service Award for 30 years of service at UT Austin.

Jacki Hecht, project coordinator for the Johnson-Turpin Center for Gerontological Nursing, received a Staff Service Award for 10 years of service at UT Austin. She was also recognized as one of the Texas Nurses Association's Outstanding Texas Nurses for 2026.

Yesenia Lares-Albiter, director of graduate advising and admissions, received the 2026 Texas Exes James W. Vick Award for Academic Advising.

Ana Loera, primary care nursing supervisor, received the SON Star Award for Texas Nursing staff in December 2025.

Cindy Taylor, assistant director of the Cain Center, received a Staff Service Award for 10 years of service at UT Austin.

Prati Rijal-Trimble, web project manager, received a Staff Service Award for 20 years of service at UT Austin.

Students

Olivia Castiglioni, BSN, RN, AG-CNS, MSN student, was named recipient of the 2026-2027 Myrna D. Schlegel AWARE (Alzheimer's Women's Association for Resources and Education) Scholarship.

Namuun Clifford, MSN, APRN, FNP-C, PhD student, received Research First Place recognition for a poster presentation at the 2026 American Association of Colleges in Nursing (AACN) Doctoral Education Conference.

Nattasit Katchamat, PhD student, received Research First Place recognition for a poster presentation at the 2026 American Association of Colleges in Nursing (AACN) Doctoral Education Conference.

Dongmi Kim, BSN, RN, PhD student, received Research First Place recognition for a poster presentation at the 2026 American Association of Colleges in Nursing (AACN) Doctoral Education Conference.

Minyoung “Christine” Kim, BSN student, was named recipient of the highly competitive American Nurses Foundation (ANF) scholarship.

Allan Mazurak, DNP student, was selected as a 2026 Pat Tillman Scholar by the Pat Tillman Foundation.

Amy Patten, PhD student, was selected as a 2026-27 Philanthropic Education Organization (PEO) Scholar Award recipient.

Merci Paulhill, PhD student, was awarded a Graduate Archer Fellowship and she received the 2026 Southern Nursing Research Society (SNRS) Top Student Poster Award.

Seulgi Ryu, PhD student, received Research First Place recognition for a poster presentation at the 2026 American Association of Colleges in Nursing (AACN) Doctoral Education Conference.

Sudhathai Sirithepmontree, PhD student, received Research First Place recognition for a poster presentation at the 2026 American Association of Colleges in Nursing (AACN) Doctoral Education Conference.

Bora Sun, PhD student, received Research First Place recognition for a poster presentation at the 2026 American Association of Colleges in Nursing (AACN) Doctoral Education Conference.

Alumni

Emma Cho, PhD '23, RN, lab assistant, received a \$750 research grant from Sigma Theta Tau International's Epsilon Theta Chapter.

Erin Dickerman, MBA, BSN, was promoted to Vice President, Digital Innovation & Informatics / Associate Privacy Officer of Community Hospital Corporation (CHC) in Plano, Texas.

Debra Kosko, DNP, MN, BSN '79, FNP-BC, FAANP, was named a Fellow of the American Academy of Nursing.

Haylie Montemayor, BSN '25, received the Flower Bud Award at St. David's North Austin Medical Center.

Tonychris Nnaka, PhD '22, MPH, RN, CPH, was named a Fellow of the American Academy of Nursing.

In Memoriam

Rita Cruz Martinez Jaso, BSN '81, passed away on September 17, 2025. Her career included ICU nursing, nursing education and helping develop one of Central Texas' first coronary care units.

Jerry Lou Browder, BSN '70, passed away on September 22, 2025. She specialized in neonatal intensive care at Cook Children's Hospital.

James “Jim” David Davis, BSN '81, MSN '89, passed away on November 8, 2025. He had a long career with Seton, including nursing leadership and mission-focused roles.

Margaret “Peggy” Wall, BSN '82, MSN '00, passed away on February 26, 2026. She worked in labor and delivery for 18 years at St. David's, and after completing her MSN, served as a women's health nurse practitioner at People's Community Clinic until she retired.

Carolyn Craig Ruddy, BSN '78, passed away on March 19, 2026. She worked primarily as a pediatric nurse at St. Elizabeth Hospital.

Janice V. Hazeldine, MSN '78, passed away on April 9, 2026. She devoted her life to nursing and education, teaching at Austin Community College for more than 30 years.

Carol Jo Wilson, MSN '78, PhD '85, passed away on April 23, 2026. She was a nursing educator for more than 40 years between Northern Illinois University, Loyola and the University of St. Francis where she served as dean for 16 years.

Mitzi Irene Nuhn Dreher, BSN '54, MSN '58, passed away on June 16, 2026, at the age of 94. She taught for six years at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston and 30 years at The University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing, where her career culminated as Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Student Affairs.

Sandra “Sandy” Ann Jones, PhD '87, passed away on June 18, 2026. A U.S. Navy veteran, she served as a nurse and nursing educator before concluding her career as an academic dean at Barnes-Jewish Hospital.

Betty J. Dunn, MSN '78, passed away on August 21, 2025. She was one of the first nurses to work for the Texas State Department of Health in Medicare Certifications. She also taught gerontological nursing before going on to own and operate Austin Eldercare.

Dale Lee Force, BSN '71, passed away on August 3, 2026. She served as a Labor and Delivery nurse until the birth of her third child.

2026 Rising Star Alumni Award:

Tonychris Nnaka, PhD '22, MPH, RN, CPH, FAAN, Associate Vice President for Health Research and Innovation at the University of North Texas Health Science Center at Fort Worth (UNT Health), has been honored with the Rising Star Alumni Award. A proud Longhorn alumnus, he earned his PhD in Nursing Science from UT Austin, his MPH from the UNT Health Science Center and his BSN from UT Arlington. Nnaka's research training has included NIH-funded fellowships at UT Austin and the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth. His work intersects technology-enabled chronic disease management, health equity and implementation science. He currently serves

as a Multiple Principal Investigator on an NIH-funded UH3 clinical trial focused on chronic pain management among rural adults and co-leads a HRSA-funded workforce development grant focused on training nurses and other healthcare professionals. Beyond his research and academic leadership, Nnaka has served as a health policy advisor to the mayor of Dallas, bringing his expertise in health disparities and data-driven decision-making to the broader community. His contributions to healthcare and leadership have been recognized by the Dallas Business Journal and Modern Healthcare, both of which named him among their 40 Under 40 honorees, recognizing him as a rising leader in the healthcare and academic sectors.

Distinguished Alumni Award:

The School of Nursing is proud to honor **Annette B. Wysocki**, PhD '86, RN, FAAN, FNYAM, dean and professor at the University at Buffalo School of Nursing, with the Distinguished Alumni Award. An internationally recognized nurse scientist, educator and academic leader, Wysocki has dedicated her career to advancing nursing science, wound healing research and nursing education. Wysocki earned her PhD in Nursing from UT Austin and her MSN and BSN from East Carolina University. Her research on the pathophysiology of delayed healing in chronic wounds has contributed to the development of innovative wound dressings and diagnostic approaches and has received support from the NIH, National Science Foundation and other organizations. Throughout her career, Wysocki has held significant leadership positions, including dean of the Stony Brook University School of Nursing and scientific director at the National Institute of Nursing Research, helping advance nursing research, education and health care nationally.

Retirements:

Heather Becker, PhD, research scientist, retired after 40-plus years as a School of Nursing staff member.

Carol Delville, PhD '08, MSN '03, BSN '01, APRN, ACNS-BC, FCNSI, clinical associate professor, retired after 18 years as a School of Nursing faculty member.

Chris Divin, PhD '15, APRN, FNP-BC, clinical assistant professor, retired after more than 10 years as a School of Nursing faculty member.

Alexandra García, PhD '02, RN, FAAN, professor, retired after 23 years as a School of Nursing faculty member.

Amy Holland, MSN '07, BSN '76, clinical instructor, retired after almost 19 years as a School of Nursing faculty member.

Sharon Horner, PhD, RN, FAAN, professor, retired after 32 years as a School of Nursing faculty member.



The University of Texas at Austin
School of Nursing

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