



## **Training the Trainers:** The Jonas Center fills our nursing pool

Donald Jonas served in the Marine Corps in the early 1950s. Then he began a career in retail sales that brought him great success. He ultimately founded three national chains selling housewares or department-store goods. He and his wife Barbara became quite wealthy—and quite philanthropic. They became active leaders with the Guggenheim Museum, the KIPP charter school network, the American Jewish Congress, the Horace Mann School, and Heifer International.

They also created a large art collection, which they intended to donate to the public when they passed away. But when the collection's value appreciated far beyond their expectations, the couple decided not to wait. They resolved to sell some of the most valuable pieces and then plow the proceeds into charitable work.

In 2004 they set up a donor-advised fund and gifted 15 paintings to it. These were then offered for sale at Christie's. The auction seeded the Jonas Family Fund with over \$44 million.

The delighted family began to consider which causes they would most like to assist with the resulting funds. They considered medical research, mental health, and public education. Finally they settled on nursing, and eventually veterans as well.

There have been hundreds of thousands of unfilled nursing positions in the U.S. for years. By 2022, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing estimates, job openings in the field will top one million. Why so many jobs? The nation has too many nurses in some places, and not enough in a great many other locales. Our aging population is increasing demand for nurses. And many nurses are themselves reaching retirement age.

V.A. hospitals are particularly vulnerable to this trend. A 2015 Inspector General report ranked nurses as the second most critical staffing need in the V.A. health-care workforce, ahead of psychologists and physical therapists. Though it hired nearly 7,300 nurses in 2014, it lost over 4,500 that same year.

There is a bottleneck that limits the ability of the U.S. to overcome our nurse shortage: too few instructors. In 2014, 78,000 applicants were turned away from nursing schools in part because there weren't enough professors to go around. There are currently about 1,500 open faculty positions in nursing schools around the country. That is where the Jonas family decided to make its mark.

### **The Jonas Center**

Within a year of their art auction, Donald and Barbara had established the Jonas Center for Nursing and Veterans Healthcare. Its basic thesis was this: if the first bottleneck in the nursing pipeline is a lack of qualified professors, trainers, and instructors, investments are needed to expand the number of individuals with doctorates and other teaching degrees in nursing. Scholarship support could encourage the next generation of instructors to learn the trade and fill areas of critical need.

Two years after creating the Jonas Center, a dedicated program was launched, with a \$2.5 million commitment from the family, to train new leaders and scholars in nursing. Partnerships were established with leading nursing schools to create two-year \$20,000 scholarships in support of doctoral candidates in nursing. A commitment of that size is sufficient to substantially improve degree-completion rates, without having to foot the recipient's entire schooling bill. Scholars are also offered leadership development, funding to attend the Jonas Center's annual nursing conference, and access to a strong alumni network.

Darlene Curley had worked as a registered nurse, taught in the field for decades, and built a hundred-person company of visiting nurses serving rural Maine, while also serving in the state's legislature. In 2009 she was hired to lead the Jonas Center, and charged with turning its promising regional scholarship for nursing instructors into a national effort. The center began expanding the number of partner institutions where it offered scholarships. It built a top-flight advisory board. And it brought in other donors to expand its efforts. By 2016, the program had funded 1,000 nurse faculty and clinical leaders in all 50 states.

### **Adding veterans to the mix**

Around 2010, like many donors, Donald Jonas recognized some of the challenges new veterans were facing. He decided to do something about it. Rather than opening an entirely new grantmaking portfolio, his charity's board encouraged him to harness its existing expertise. The result was the Jonas Veterans Healthcare Program.

"In 2011 we reached out to 20 schools of nursing near military facilities," says Curley. "The University of San Diego was the first to respond, and by the next day we had an agreement. Only with private philanthropy is that sort of brisk action possible. Our first pilot in San Diego started with five nurses, and we grew from there."

The Jonas Center specifically sought out institutions that had relationships with local V.A. hospitals, so they could share discoveries and work together. That turned out to be difficult to achieve. The center approached the V.A. secretary, the "Joining Forces" initiative promoted by the White House as a way of linking government and philanthropy, the V.A. department of nursing, the V.A. research department, and the V.A. office of policy planning. Individuals within each bureaucracy saw the clear value of what the Jonas Center offered. But it took five years for the Jonas Center to secure a simple agreement that allows its scholars to share research with the V.A.

The Jonas Veterans Healthcare Program only accepts candidates who have experience with veterans, or are veterans themselves. It has recruited V.A. nurses looking to advance their careers. But it includes candidates working in a variety of medical settings. “Only a third of veterans get their care at the V.A.—everyone else is out in the community,” notes Curley. “We are working to advance the knowledge and education of nurses who work in the V.A., but also those who are working with veterans all over the country.”



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The Jonas Center seeks out candidates with special research interests relevant to vets. “We’ve been very specific about the percentage we want to be studying poly-trauma, prosthetics, care coordination, brain injuries, traumatic stress, suicide prevention, aging, and other areas where there are clear percentages of veterans who have those diagnoses,” states Curley. It also directly funds research in these kinds of areas. “I reached out to all nursing schools with a specialty in pain management and said ‘we have funding for nurses working on pain focused on veterans.’ I had ten schools get back to me in a week.”

“Our next effort will be to target our scholarships geographically. We’ve been doing some mapping so that next time we recruit, I can say, ‘Where is there need for more psych nurse practitioners? For more geriatric nurses?’ And we’ll go out and recruit at schools near those places of high need.”

### **Rounding up partners**

The Jonas Family Fund has so far invested \$7 million in its effort to train nurses to serve veterans. It has also rounded up partners to put additional funds into the effort. These include the Ahmanson Foundation, Bob Woodruff Foundation, Milbank Foundation, May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust, Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, Robert R. McCormick Foundation, and others.

As of 2016, the Jonas Center had supported 285 scholars at 80 universities via its program centered on vets. Already, some of these Jonas Scholars have

moved into crucial roles in the military or veteran health systems. One, for instance, is the director of surgical services at a Navy hospital. Others work at research and clinical sites like the V.A. Polytrauma Clinic, the Defense and Veteran Brain Injury Center, the Walter Reed Medical Center, and the San Antonio Military Medical Center.

The Jonas family has committed to continuing its donations to nursing education through 2028, a substantial portion of which will remain focused on the particular needs of veterans. Its scholarships delivered through nursing schools proved to be an effective way to expand the nursing pipeline. The Jonas Center estimates that each nursing professor teaches 200 nurses per year—helping propel 5,000 nurses into the profession over a 25-year career. And significant numbers of these additional nurses are being strategically targeted by the funder into special fields of need—in addition to its special interest in veterans, the center has offered special support for nurses focused on mental health in Nevada, diabetes in West Virginia, and other niches recommended by its advisory board. Thus do the Jonas gifts bolster needed expertise as well as necessary numbers of professionals.