



"Today will stand as a shining moment in the history of nursing revolution"

-Joan Swirsky, speaking at the Nurses March on Washington

BY
STEPHEN P. SMITH

On March 31, 1995 history was made. Nurses, angered by corporate greed and dangerous hospital policies, took the first step towards reclaiming their profession and reaffirming the role of nursing in America's healthcare system. In an unprecedented display of solidarity, an estimated 35,000 nurses descended on the nation's Capitol to deliver an urgent message to the public and to members of the 104th Congress.

From California to Florida, and all points in between, nurses drove cars, rode buses, flew, even hitch-hiked to Washington, D.C., to participate in the first annual Nurses March on Washington. With one loud and determined voice, they warned all Americans that they were being cheated and deceived by a new profit-driven system of healthcare that places corporate interests above the welfare of patients.

The March was the brainchild of Laura Gasparis Vontrolio, publisher of *REVOLUTION*, who realized that to resolve the complicated problems that beset the nursing profession, concern must be transformed into action. *REVOLUTION's* message of empowerment has restored pride in nurses and given its readers the motivational tools needed to take decisive action. On that bright spring morning, the concept of empowerment was manifest as thousands of nurses mobilized to elevate patient advocacy to new heights.

The day began with two orientation sessions at the Washington Court Hotel, where nurses were roused with messages of encouragement. The conference room was jammed with nurses brandishing banners and placards that read, "You Need a Nurse to Save Your Life!" The American Nurses Association gave the crowd a taste of what it's like to be in control for a change by telling them, "Pennsylvania Avenue is closed today because of you!" The room erupted in thunderous applause as nurses sprang to their feet, electrified with excitement.

As they filed out of the hotel to make their way to the Capitol for the noon rally, nurses could be heard along New Jersey Avenue rehearsing their chants and slogans, "Hey hey, ho ho, managed care has got to go." In the distance, another group approached the Hill shouting, "Nurses United, Will Never Be Divided!" As clusters of nurses crossed the Mall, hundreds more poured in from Constitution Avenue and Independence Avenue, turning the streets of Washington into rivers of nurses.

Dozens of buses pulled up to the Capitol, unloading nurses by the Grant Memorial across from the Reflecting Pool. As one nurse stepped off the bus and looked up at the multitude gathered on the

west front of the Capitol building, she appeared stunned, exclaiming, "Oh my God, look!" Another nurse, directly behind her, gazed in amazement at the site. "We did it," she marveled. "They came. We're all here." It was a surprising observation for nurses who, historically, have been a less-than-cohesive professional group.

Many nurses expressed reassurance at the size of the crowd. "I'm so glad to see there are this many nurses who feel the way I do. I was beginning to think I was the only one," said a nurse of 25 years from Chicago. Her friend and co-worker quickly interjected, "And just think, for every nurse who's here today, there are thousands who wanted to come but couldn't."

As they gathered on the lawn, nurses introduced themselves to each other and exchanged stories of atrocities from their hometown hospitals. A nurse from Florida, when asked why she came to Washington, bitterly exclaimed, "I work in a neonatal ICU where they are firing nurses and cross-training the housekeeping staff to do 'minor patient care duties.' Can you believe it? Housekeepers in the NICU! That's why I'm here!"

As the crowd swelled, the air was charged with anticipation. Nurses surrounded the podium, filling the steps of the Capitol on either side, as they waited to hear from an impressive roster of speakers. Ms. Vontrolio, organizer of the March, was introduced by her husband, Charles Vontrolio, M.D. as a "leader who has the courage to stand up and speak out," prompting a jubilant ovation and chants of "Laura! Laura! Laura!"

Dressed in a white uniform, Laura set the tone for the day in her opening remarks. "Today, we are taking our first small step together, for we have been quiet too long. It is time for registered nurses to speak out. It is time for registered nurses to fight back." It was a declaration of war against complacency, and a warning to those nurses who protect the status quo to either lead, follow, or get out of the way.

The primary issue was unsafe nurse-patient ratios. As hospitals scramble to position themselves in a new competitive marketplace, administrators have taken the knife to nursing budgets, slashing staffs to unprecedented levels. Further, they have diluted nursing departments by replacing R.N.s with cheaper unlicensed "assistive personnel," severely compromising the quality of care delivered. Some hospitals, advised by highly paid advertising consultants, have audaciously packaged their new product as "patient focused care."

Before a contingent of TV cameras and reporters, Laura put hospital administrators on notice. "It is time to publicly expose the



corporate greed that removes R.N.s from the bedsides of sick patients. We can't afford *not* to speak out about those unsafe hospital environments."

Nurses are particularly disturbed by the hospital industry's insistence that cuts in nursing budgets are necessary for hospitals to survive. The fact is, hospitals are prospering as never before.

According to the January 1994 issue of *Forbes* magazine, healthcare has been the most profitable industry in the country over the past five years. In 1992, hospitals' aggregate profits were \$11.9 billion, which represents an increase of 19 percent over 1991 profits, and the highest one-year total profit since 1983. An angry nurse raised a placard above her head, "Patients Before Profits!"

While hospital administrators whittle nursing departments to the bone, they claim the quality of care is not being compromised. Nurses know this is an outrageous lie. As fewer nurses take care of larger numbers of sicker patients, compromises have to be made and patients simply get less care.

In remarks directed to Congress, Laura called on government to intervene on behalf of patients; "We're going to need legislation that establishes federal and state mandates for safe nurse-patient ratios." She struck a nerve in the audience as she further demanded, "We want Congress to amend the Supreme Court decision of May 19, 1994, that strips federal labor law protection from this nation's nurses. We want legal protection for those nurses who speak out against dangerous conditions in hospitals."

The Supreme Court demonstrated a fundamental ignorance of the role of nursing when they ruled that all nurses were supervisors and therefore obligated to place the interests of their employers before the interests of their patients. As it stands now, nurses are effectively being encouraged not to advocate for patients if it means speaking out against dangerous hospital conditions, since doing so could result in their termination and leave them without recourse. After the rally, a nurse from Philadelphia, commenting on the Supreme Court ruling said, "They might as well tell us to stop breathing."

The Nurses March on Washington caught the attention of President Clinton who dispatched Karen Nussbaum, head of the Women's Bureau at the Department of Labor, to deliver a message to nurses at the rally. Nussbaum received a chilly response as she read the President's letter: "I want to extend my gratitude on behalf of all Americans for your critical efforts to help protect the health of our citizens. Growing up under the guidance of a registered nurse, I understand the significant contributions that registered nurses make to countless Americans."

The message was interrupted several times by jeers from the crowd, and challenged by nurses shouting, "Prove it! Prove it!" It was a sensitive issue for many nurses who felt they were sold out by the Clinton Administration's Healthcare Task Force in favor of the cozy hip pocket of the insurance industry.

President Clinton's letter ended, "Hillary joins me in thanking all of you who have worked so hard." This drew a resounding chorus of boos and harsh expletives from nurses who objected to the First Lady's handling of healthcare reform. Laura Gasparis Vonfrolio broke the tension with a humorous retort, "I guess there are some Republicans here today." Partisan politics were not the order of the day. Republican or Democrat, nurses rejoiced in their new-found solidarity, which was symbolized by the astonishing partnership of

REVOLUTION - The Journal of Nurse Empowerment and the American Nurses Association. Although the two organizations have been at odds with each other in the past, they wisely recognized the value of joining forces to promote a common agenda. Their cooperative effort to organize this March was nothing less than a diplomatic masterstroke.

A.N.A. President Virginia Trotter Betts approached the podium and put the A.N.A. and its membership on record: "We nurses are here today to blow the whistle on those in the healthcare industry who prefer profits over people, administrative bonuses over healing." She echoed earlier calls for federal and state mandates that would require hospitals to disclose their nurse-patient ratios. The A.N.A. included this recommendation in their testimony before the Institute of Medicine's Committee on the Adequacy of Nurse Staffing in October of last year.

Trotter Betts emphasized the importance of enlisting public support for the concerns of nurses, saying, "The public must know what's going on. That's part of why we're here today." The A.N.A. has embarked on a public awareness campaign aimed at educating consumers about the dangerous effects of hospital downsizing and restructuring. They have distributed over 200,000 brochures entitled "Every Patient Deserves a Nurse," free copies of which can be obtained by calling 1-800-837-0323.

In her closing remarks, the A.N.A. president left no doubt that she had joined the revolution: "The history of nursing is to be reformists, to be activists. Nurses everywhere must continue from today to speak out for our patients."

All totaled, there were 18 speakers on the podium during the rally, including four members of Congress and five union representatives. As the last speech drew to an end, Laura stepped forward to announce the beginning of the March. Facing the tumultuous crowd, she directed a new chorus, to the tune of John Lennon's

classic song of protest, "Give Peace a Chance." The melody echoed through the granite corridors of the Capitol, then carried across the west lawn, stirring memories of the late '60s — "All we are saying, is save patient care."

Excitement reached fever pitch as the assembly of nurses made its way towards Pennsylvania Avenue. Thousand of placards were raised high overhead, as 20-foot banners of red, white and blue blazed in the afternoon sun. The scene had all the spectacle of a massive Fourth of July parade as nurses leaned into the cold gusty air and began their march to the White House. Capitol police closed adjacent roadways and gave the nurses a motorcycle escort along their route. In front of the procession, ten nurses, standing side by side, held a bold black and white banner which read, "REVOLUTION - Will Never Be Divided!" A New York City nurse, hoarse from cheering and shouting, exclaimed, "Don't ever let anyone tell you we can't pull ourselves together. I've never been so proud to be a nurse!"

Washington residents, accustomed to rallies and demonstrations, took notice of the multitude as it paraded through downtown Washington. Many seemed surprised to discover that this immense and raucous crowd was made up of nurses. An elderly woman yelled into the sea of placards and banners, "Why are you marching?" One nurse replied, "We're marching for you!" Another yelled, "You need a nurse to save your life!" The woman nodded and waved

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NURSE-A-CRAM, NURSE-A-FAX, NURSE-A-NOTE, NURSE-A-VOTE!

Words have power. Action has power. But nothing has as much clout as cold, hard facts! R.N.s now have the opportunity to make their own priorities known to those who have the power to translate these concerns into concrete legislation — the U.S. Congress. Here is what to do: *Document* each and every *untoward* event that happens in your hospital as a result of "downsizing" policies that have replaced nurses with unlicensed aides. If you are afraid of losing your job, sign yourself, "Concerned R.N. and voter."

Be specific. Name the hospital and address, the name of the patient, the date of the occurrence, a description of the occurrence (accident, error, death, etc.), the R.N.-patient ratio, and the fact that this event might have (and probably would have) been avoided if an R.N. were present or if the R.N.-patient ratio at your hospital did not militate against patient safety.

Ask your co-workers to join this effort and *every week* send your report to:

President Bill Clinton
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20500

The Honorable Congressman Bill Thomas
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Congressman Newt Gingrich
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Senator Robert Packwood
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Senator Paul Wellstone
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Include your own Senators and members of Congress, as well as your State Senator and Assemblyperson.

Send this weekly report by mail, or by Western Union at 1-800-325-6000, or call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at 1-202-224-3121 for the fax numbers of any Congressperson or Senator in the U.S. Congress.

Keep a copy of your reports for your records and please send a copy to the office of *REVOLUTION*, 56 McArthur Avenue, Suite 100, Staten Island, New York 10312. At the Second Annual Nurses March on Washington next year, we will be presenting a huge list of hospital horrors that have occurred as a result of replacing R.N.s with unlicensed aides.

Cold, hard facts don't lie. If our elected officials don't respond to this national health emergency, they will have to be reminded that registered nurses vote!

If you need any additional information, please call our offices at 1-800-331-6534.

back, shouting an enthusiastic "Thank you!"

While some roadside observers seemed perplexed by the commotion, others appeared delighted, applauding, honking their horns, and waving as the marchers passed. Many offered expressions of encouragement and support. A large man chewing on a cigar bristled, "You tell 'em, ladies. Don't take any baloney!"

One couple on vacation from Boston, was asked if they knew why the nurses were marching. They did not. As the purpose of the March was being explained to them, the gentleman interrupted. Pointing to his wife, he said, "You know you're talking to a nurse." Embarrassed because she did not know of the March, the woman took her husband by the hand, stepped into the street, and said, "Let's go honey, this is important." The March grew by two.

As the front line approached the Treasury Department, you could look back on the column of marchers and see nurses standing shoulder to shoulder, taking up four lanes of Pennsylvania Avenue for a solid mile. A nurse from California was asked how it felt to be part of a March of this magnitude. "It feels great! I look at all these faces and I feel like I know each and every one of them." Exiting Pennsylvania Avenue, then rounding the Treasury Building, the long line of nurses filled Lafayette Square across from the White House. While some reassembled to chant and cheer, others lined the fence along the north face of the White House where the New York Nurses Association hung a large purple and yellow banner which read, "Every Patient Deserves an R.N., not an imitation!"

The mass dissolved into small groups, scattered throughout the park. Some debated the issues at hand, while others reclined on the

grass to reflect on an exhilarating day. As the clamor faded, local television crews interviewed nurses for the evening news. Nurses were left with a variety of impressions from the day. One nurse from Louisiana, at the crossroads of a career change, said, "I swear to you, last month I decided to quit nursing completely. Ten years of beating my head against the wall was enough. Now, I feel like there's hope for us. I don't think I can leave now." Another less certain nurse asked, "Where do we go from here?"

As adrenaline dissipated, weary nurses boarded buses and taxis for their journey back to the front lines. Some showed remarkable resilience by taking to the streets again to press their public relations agenda. Still carrying placards and waving flags, troops of five-to-ten nurses fanned out to talk with bystanders about the March and their purpose for coming to Washington. Back in Lafayette Park, now quiet and still, a bronze statue of a woman reaches to the sky, holding a menacing placard, "R.N. Cutbacks, The Future of Hell-thcare."

[STEPHEN P. SMITH, R.N., worked for five years as a nursing supervisor at the King Fahad Hospital in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and conducted lectures and seminars on nursing there. A freelance writer, he is working on "A Nurse's Guide to Saudi Arabia." Having worked as a director of nursing, assistant director of nursing, nursing supervisor, and head nurse, he currently works in the intensive care unit of Florida Hospital in Orlando, Florida, where he lives with his wife Denise and sons Jack and Dylan. Look for Mr. Smith's article, "Where Do We Go From Here?," in the next issue of *REVOLUTION*.]

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UNITED WE STAND

The Nurses March on Washington

By- Stephen P. Smith

Synopsis - From his front row vantage point, an R.N. describes the most exciting and momentous event in modern nursing history.