Sister Journeys with Her “Beloveds” in Scranton, PA

Sister Ruth Neely, RSM, a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community and a nurse practitioner at the Wright Center for Primary Care in Scranton, PA, calls her AIDS patients “my beloveds.”

“You're a person, not a disease,” Sister Ruth counsels her patients at the only primary care center for HIV/AIDS in a seven-county region. “When I look at you, I don't see the disease. AIDS is just a part of your life. It's not who you are. There's no face to this disease.”

Sister Ruth typically sees the faces of 10 patients a day, five days a week at this clinic which trains medical residents in innovative, team-based healthcare. “But, like our foundress Catherine McAuley who helped people in need, I cannot do this alone,” says Sister Ruth.

“I work with a wonderful staff of two infectious disease physicians, two nurses, three case managers, one dietitian, one nutritionist and the support of psychologists and pharmacists.

“I minister as a nurse navigator to help people through their AIDS diagnoses and help them get the care they need,” says Sister Ruth. “Not only do I help them with their medical needs. Once I helped an AIDS patient find a bed, another time I helped a 36-year-old woman who was imprisoned most of her life reunite with her estranged mother, only to have her die in her mother’s arms days later. I sing to my patients; I
Mid-Atlantic Sister Journeys with Patients

Sister Ruth Neely, RSM (center left), consults with founder Dr. Wright (far left) of the medical clinic where she ministers and Dr. Deepa Gopavaram, MD (center right) and resident Prathiba Katta (right).

send them notes; I encourage them every step of the way."

No cure exists for this 30-year-old disease; it is always fatal without treatment. In the U.S., most patients survive many years after diagnosis because of the availability of a combination of several drugs that reduce the number of HIV particles in the bloodstream.

“In Northeastern Pennsylvania, we get new diagnoses every day,” says Sister Ruth. “Some people are in their 20s, some in their 40s, some from outside the area, and some who are in prison. Typically, our patient population is underserved, hard-to-reach, and low income.” Forty percent of her patients are also Hepatitis C positive from drug-related exposure.

A nurse for 45 years, Sister Ruth started as a licensed practical nurse in Scranton, PA, caring for older sisters at St. Mary’s and other local convents. After becoming a registered nurse, Ruth became director of a 75-bed skilled nursing facility across from Mercy Johnstown Hospital.

Next she served as Mother Superior of the former Dallas Regional Community for three years. Afterwards, she took care of older sisters as the director of health services at what is now Mercy Center in Dallas, PA. Then at age 50, she decided to become a nurse practitioner and went back to school at Misericordia University.

“My patients see me as more pastoral than their nurse. I experience God moments with them. I journey with them. I’m there for the birth of their children and the death of my patients,” says Sister Ruth. “Caring and compassion is our
model of treatment.”

Others subscribe to her model of nursing. Sister Ruth was appointed to the Pennsylvania Governor’s Health Policy Board, an advisory group within the Department of Health tasked with development of the State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP). The group also advises the Secretary of Health on public policy issues related to underserved populations in Pennsylvania.

“My dream is to reinvent health care in a whole new way. As nurse practitioners, I think we’re the future. I have ideas!” says Sister Ruth. “I want to break down the barriers of this disease and see the day where there’s no stigma of having HIV/AIDS.”