ADVENTUROUS SPIRITS
Duquesne Students Integrate Global Nursing Experiences

By Holly McCalmon

Anchorage, Alaska’s blue skies are returning as the dusk of winter slowly gives way to spring. Peak season for salmon fishing has started, and locals will soon see as many as 19 hours of daylight in the northernmost U.S. state.

Meanwhile, across the globe, Stuttgart, Germany’s Spring Festival is in full swing with patrons meandering cobblestone roads and enjoying biergartens.

Although Alaska and Germany are half a world apart, two Duquesne Nursing School graduates who call each place home are closer than the 4,700 miles between them, connected by their love of nursing and sense of adventure.
THE DUQUESNE DAYS

When reminiscing about their School of Nursing days, 2011 graduates Amber Setlock and Brittney Poole Gurski reflect fondly—and with a few giggles—on experiences in Pittsburgh’s communities and abroad in Nicaragua that allowed them to hone clinical nursing skills while gaining an appreciation for other cultures.

“The faculty would encourage us to do community screenings throughout Pittsburgh. Taking blood pressures on the streets we were thinking, ‘Why are we doing this?’ But looking back now it wasn’t so much the clinical experience as it was being comfortable speaking to people in different communities or of different cultures,” Setlock happily recounted. “That’s important, because as a nurse you never know who or what you’re going to encounter and you learn to adapt to whatever comes your way.”

While studying at Duquesne, both Setlock and Gurski traveled with the School of Nursing’s faculty and alumni to Nicaragua over spring break—a trip that has been enriching Duquesne’s nursing students for more than two decades. The 10-day field experience teams nursing students with peers from Universidad Politecnica de Nicaragua in Managua. The trip provides invaluable learning opportunities in transcultural nursing, exposing students to procedures and health care settings ranging from vaccinating infants in an urgent care facility to conducting health screenings in community clinics.

“Nicaragua was a very profound trip for me and really clarified the important things that I wanted to focus on in my life and throughout my career,” Setlock recalled. “I definitely think that it opened my eyes to the world around us and that there are so many people in need. That’s what makes Duquesne unique. You get a wide variety of experiences that not everyone gets.”

AMBER SETLOCK’S ALASKAN ADVENTURE

Setlock always knew she wanted to be a nurse but never imagined where it would take her. Originally from Indiana, Pa., located 45 miles northeast of Pittsburgh, she would eventually find herself on a road to the top of the world—Alaska.

“I just knew that I wanted to be a nurse,” said Setlock, BSN’11. “Duquesne’s campus felt like a good fit. Everybody was super welcoming from the beginning. All of the School of Nursing professors and instructors seemed very involved, which I was really excited about. I still hear from some of them even now.”

Setlock also found a “good fit” in oncology nursing during her clinical rotations and again after graduation at UPMC Montefiore Hospital’s surgical oncology unit—on the same floor where she’d completed her preceptorship.

HITTING THE ROAD

After working at Montefiore, Setlock continued to travel, making service trips to Honduras to teach women how to provide for themselves and to a remote Kenyan medical clinic.

In 2012, looking to expand her life and career, Setlock became a travel nurse and set out to see the rest of the country. Working mostly in oncology and

1. Amber Setlock and Brittney Poole Gurski on graduation day, Duquesne School of Nursing ’11 and ready to start their adventure.
2. Amber and her boyfriend Benjamin admire the 49th U.S. state’s majestic beauty and blue skies, especially during the long days of summer.
3. Fishing, fishing and more fishing, along with some hunting, are just some of the outdoor Alaskan adventures that Setlock and Benjamin do together.
4. Setlock and Benjamin at the official start of the famous Iditarod trail sled dog Race that covers a distance from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska over 8 to 15 or more days.
5. Gurski, along with her son Jaxson and husband Jeffrey, dressed in traditional German regalia enjoying the 2019 Oktoberfest in Munich, Germany.
6. Before moving to Germany, Gurski and her family enjoyed visiting Setlock in Alaska where they took time to explore the scenic hiking trails.
Bowman recently celebrated her third anniversary as a staff member at Duquesne. As an alumna of the Duquesne University School of Education, she studied elementary education and taught in Virginia before moving to Pennsylvania to teach and earn her Master of Education in reading and language arts. “I’m a (Duquesne) lifer!” she says. As part of the School of Nursing’s Academic Affairs Office, Bowman helps provide technical and logistical support for the Health Education Systems Incorporated (HESI) exams, ExamSoft and other exams for nursing students. A self-described organizational person at heart, she enjoys handling this type of work. “I love the challenge of organizing something that could be messy.”

“I always loved Duquesne, so I just kept looking for jobs here. Honestly, I prayed about it and I felt like I was supposed to go more toward this track in life, more the business end, and this position opened up and it just felt, it felt like a God thing. I applied and it seemed like the perfect fit. I just love the family feel here.”

ALASKA—NORTH TO THE FUTURE

Alaska’s state motto “North to the Future,” a representation of optimism and promise, proved prophetic for Setlock and her friend: within six months of starting their 2016 adventure, both landed full-time nursing positions at Alaska Regional Hospital in Anchorage.

At Alaska Regional, Setlock progressed from bedside nurse with the medical oncology inpatient unit to her current position as adult oncology nurse navigator. This role has been challenging but also rewarding as she helps patients traverse the confusing and frightening landscape of cancer treatment. Approaches that work in the lower 48 states don’t often work in Alaska, so Setlock has customized the navigation program for her patients to reduce barriers and improve access to care.

“One of my biggest roles is being an advocate for my patients. I’ve built strong relationships with my patients because I see them through their whole treatment. I get to meet their families and their best friends and their husbands or wives. Without my patient interactions I would not be successful. It keeps me going.”
BRITTNEY POOLE GURSKI’S GERMAN ADVENTURE

Gurski grew up in Flemington, N.J., a small town in the northern part of the state, and found her way to nursing after a conversation with a high school friend. She discovered Duquesne University in the early stages of her college search, and once Gurski attended a School of Nursing Preview Day on campus during her senior year in high school, she fell in love with the school and program.

“I’m super grateful that my friend and I had that conversation. Nursing is endless. There are so many opportunities and I’ve loved each one that I’ve had: from nursing policy to research to bedside nursing and then as a nurse practitioner. My hardest part has been narrowing that down, but then I had the realization that I don’t really have to and that it can change several times throughout my life—and I’m sure it will.”

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

After graduation Gurski worked in a general and bariatric medical surgical unit at UPMC St. Margaret Hospital—the same hospital where she interned the prior summer. A year later she decided to take her career on the road as a travel nurse and moved across the country to Wyoming Medical Center in Casper, where she worked with a surgical trauma team in a step-down unit.

A few months later she moved to Tampa, Fla., and settled into the southern lifestyle with her husband, a Point Park University graduate and former Marine. There, she earned her master’s degree in nursing—graduating magna cum laude—and built a career as a clinical nurse at Tampa General Hospital’s surgical trauma intensive care unit (ICU).

“I loved working in the trauma ICU. I was at a point in my career where I needed more of a challenge. The trauma ICU was very fast paced, very on your toes. I have worked with phenomenal nurses and intelligent people wherever I’ve gone, but that was one of my favorites.”

Gurski changed paths again after having a baby and putting her master’s degree to work as a family nurse practitioner at a few local urgent care facilities before moving abroad in the summer of 2019 to Stuttgart, Germany, for her husband’s work with the Department of Defense.

DIVERGING CULTURES

For this Jersey girl turned Florida transplant, the move to the countryside of Stuttgart, has brought challenges and a different kind of learning curve—one Gurski is embracing.

“I do love the culture here. Nursing in Germany is extremely different than back in the States with limited opportunities. So for right now I’ve transitioned from a full-time nurse practitioner to a stay-at-home mom, which has also been very challenging work,” Gurski admitted.

The wait for a new full-time nursing opportunity shouldn’t take long. She recently submitted her application to become a Red Cross volunteer at the nearby U.S. military base. She is also a board member for the Stuttgart Nurses Journal Club sponsored by the Red Cross, a club that she helped establish. In the meantime, she is still using the community-based clinical experience that she learned in Pittsburgh and Nicaragua wherever she can.

“Someone recently asked on a Stuttgart Facebook page if anyone had community clinical ideas. I was able to pull from the ones I participated in at Duquesne—blood pressures, flu shot clinics and others—and from my Nicaragua experiences. In a Third World country where people don’t even have access to medicine to Germany where they have plenty of access to medicine but where nursing is just very different, I’m still able to help as a nurse.”

ADVENTUROUS SPIRITS

Setlock’s and Gurski’s nursing careers and adventurous spirits have taken them across countries and oceans, thanks to a spark that was lit during their time at Duquesne. Grateful for the faculty support as well as the integrated community and global nursing experiences they’ve shared, they continue to plot their next moves.

Gurski is looking to further her nursing education—possibly with Duquesne’s online DNP program—so she can continue practicing as a nurse in a way that keeps her skills relevant.

“We are very, very blessed to have the opportunities that we do,” she said. “You have to remind yourself that your career can be on hold for a little while you sink into what life has to offer and soak in every little bit you can.”

Setlock continues to look for every “good fit” opportunity in her professional life and sees promise in all the future holds.

“I’m very lucky with the opportunities that I’ve had so far and I’m very happy with the position that I’m in now. I really enjoy it and the relationships I’ve built with my patients and on our hospital campus and others in town,” she said.

“After that is ‘to be determined,’ and truthfully I’m OK with that—it’s another adventure.” •