



*Dr Phumelele Jabulisiwe Kunene*

She also continued to study. She obtained her major nursing profession – B. Cur E et A (majoring in Community Health Nursing, Nursing Administration (with distinction) and Nursing Education) when she was 46 years of age. After that, it took Phumelele less than 20 years to achieve a doctorate in nursing from the University of Zululand. This octogenarian spent 42 years in the profession, ‘retiring’ in 1999, but continued to work full-time for another seven years. After that, alongside being a priest in her retirement, she continued to be sporadically involved in health care and related work.

In her almost half-a-century in the profession, Phumelele singles out a number of highlights. For instance, she became an assistant teaching nurse before she got her qualification. “As a senior student nurse in a small rural training hospital with few nurse educators, in my last year I assisted the nurse educators with first year students’ orientation, teaching in class and practical work,” she said, adding that her interest and expertise in this area of nursing education grew and was recognised.

“It is for this reason that I ended up as a nurse educator in nursing colleges and university nursing departments, teaching diplomas and degrees,” she said.

She also promoted private university study for nurses employed full-time in hospitals. As a Senior Sister, now called Operations Manager, she also supervised nursing students that were doing Clinical Care Administration and Instruction. Phumelele was happy

with the outcome of what she was doing. “It was good to see young nurses develop to become nurse leaders in the nursing profession, and moving up the ladder to high management positions in the health care system,” said this professional who was once awarded a prize as ‘Best Nursing Care Unit Manager’.

Another highlight in her career was being among the first nurses at King Edward VIII Hospital to be given the opportunity to study Intensive Care Nursing at Wentworth Hospital. “On return from that course, we were allocated to be part of the group given the responsibility of preparing for installation of a new Intensive Care Unit to be opened at our hospital,” she said.

While working at Clairwood Hospital, another Durban hospital, Phumelele was in charge of the In-service Department. She was also appointed facilitator of a course called A Nursing Process Approach to Nursing, a newly introduced package. “Part of my responsibilities in this department was to enforce continuous practical nurse learning to keep nurses updated since this was not a training hospital,” she said.

As part of the University of Zululand Nursing Science Department, Phumelele was assigned to go and open a new Nursing Department at its Umlazi Campus. “This was a big success and offered nursing degrees and diplomas like those offered at Main Campus,” she said. Many professional nurses were able to attend and study University courses part-time while fully employed. This department grew and has produced many nurse leaders in the health care system.

These are just a few of Phumelele’s milestones in her career as a nurse. After retirement, Phumelele got involved in community health projects, especially HIV and AIDS and TB. She was particularly involved in training and supervision of Home Based Care.

Reflecting on the unjust and inhumane apartheid system, Phumelele said nursing was not exempted. For instance, white nurses were paid higher salaries. Conditions of service, placement and allocation of duties were also much better for white nurses. Training schools were segregated, with no mixing of races. “Black nurses were barred from observing or assisting in certain special procedures if performed on a white client, even if that condition or procedure was so rare that they might never see it during their training,” she concluded.