

## ALUMNI PROFILE: COLLEEN CONWAY-WELCH (NHS'65)

By Lauren Wolkoff

**Colleen Conway-Welch (NHS'65) has never bothered with five- or 10-year plans.**

Throughout her 45-year career in nursing and education, she has held firmly to the belief that the key to a successful career lies, not in agonizing over every little step, but in remaining open to the bigger picture and making bold, unapologetic decisions.

“Nursing is an open ticket to the world. On just one license, you can do hundreds of things,” said Conway-Welch, who is celebrating 25 years as dean of the Vanderbilt School of Nursing.

“I never could have dreamed I would get my master’s, or my Ph.D., and I certainly never dreamed I’d become a dean,” she said. “Lots of things will come to you if you are open to looking at them. Nursing has always set me up for my next thing.”

Her philosophy has taken her farther than she could ever have imagined. She recently was named to the *Modern Healthcare* list of the Top 25 women in health care for 2009, and was honored last year by a Tennessee General Assembly resolution praising her career achievements.

### THE MAKING OF A SUCCESS STORY

Conway-Welch completed her undergraduate degree at NHS on a full scholarship, launching a roving and adventurous career that would take her all around the world, until she settled in Nashville upon starting at Vanderbilt in 1984.

That same year, she met her husband, prominent local businessman **Ted Welch**—he was her first fundraising call as the new dean.

Yet she had much to learn when she arrived at St. Mary’s Hall in the fall of 1961 at the tender age of 16.

“My parents had put me on a plane with my trunk. I arrived at National airport, got in a taxi, and crossed the Potomac three times before I got to Georgetown,” she recalled with a laugh. “I was very green.”



Colleen Conway-Welch (NHS'65), dean of the Vanderbilt School of Nursing

Anne Rayner

It did not take her long to find her way at Georgetown, however. Conway-Welch said her Georgetown experience “stretched” her—and not only academically.

Her discussions with **Jean Watson**, then-dean of the School of Nursing at the University of Colorado, about the need for substantial changes in nursing education

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“It was academically rigorous, but also socially rigorous. Georgetown added a depth of social and emotional intelligence,” she said.

Her Washington, D.C., experience also helped prepare her for future political endeavors. Not only is her husband a well-known force in political fundraising, but Conway-Welch herself has served on several federal health care commissions and has testified before Congress.

#### OPEN TO OPPORTUNITIES AND GROWTH

After graduating from NHS, Conway-Welch had her sights set on world travel, intending to work her way around the major cities of the world. She started in Honolulu, in the labor and delivery unit at Queen’s Hospital, and was planning her move to Kuala Lumpur when friends in San Francisco invited her to move there instead.

Conway-Welch spent a year in San Francisco working in an emergency room, and then moved around the country, following interesting leads and seizing professional and educational opportunities as they arose. Her travels took her to Santa Fe’s Catholic Maternity Institute, where she trained in nurse midwifery as part of her master’s degree in nursing at Catholic University, and then on to New York University for her doctorate in nursing.

She was recruited in the early 1980s to run the nurse midwifery program at the University of Colorado in Denver.

Her experience in Denver gave Conway-Welch a glimpse into academic administration, setting the stage for her 25-year tenure as dean at Vanderbilt.

motivated her to later implement these changes at Vanderbilt.

As a new dean, she oversaw a revamping of the undergraduate program and established an accelerated program to give students a variety of different entry points to earn their master’s degree—a concept that was still new and not yet widely embraced.

“[Vanderbilt] had been without a dean for two years and everyone had run out of ideas. That was an ideal time for me to show up. I said: ‘If you want me as dean, this is what I want to do,’” she said.

#### TIME FOR REFLECTION

Conway-Welch believes she is more resilient and confident in her choices now as a result of her constant movement and openness to change in her early career.

“I can look at any situation and say: ‘What’s the worst that can happen?’ If I can tolerate the possible risk or negative consequences, then I do it,” she said.

Now one of the longest-sitting deans of a nursing school in the country, Conway-Welch is still not ruling anything out for her future. While she says she has no plans to retire, she conceded a year or so off to pursue recreational interests such as reading, traveling, snow skiing, and scuba diving would be “intriguing.”

“But I can’t imagine [waking up] without something to do,” she said.