

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

BCNU's Young Nurses' Conference offered participants an opportunity to speak out about their concerns and learn more about our union

The 150 nurses and students under the age of 35 who attended BCNU's Young Nurses' Conference in late September say the two-day event was a resounding success.

"It not only lived up to my expectations," says 20-year-old Selkirk College student Ashley Langman, "but completely surpassed them. I went with little or no background knowledge, and an ambivalence to activism and leadership. I came home bursting with energy and enthusiasm, feeling that I can make a difference.

"The conference exposed me to the union and gave me the background knowledge I need to begin forming opinions. At this point, I am thoroughly impressed with BCNU for making the time and effort to elicit the participation of youthful members and for realizing we are the key to the future of nursing."

"It was an excellent way to introduce myself to BCNU," agrees Sarah Nelson, who nurses at Victoria's Royal Jubilee Hospital, "and network with other young nurses from around BC."

BCNU Council organized the conference because it recognizes the need to encourage young people to get involved, not only as activists but as

potential leaders. (The current average age of BC RNs in 2002 was 45.2, with thousands eligible to retire in the next decade.)

"We wanted to hear directly from young nurses and students about the issues and values that are important to them," says BCNU president Debra McPherson, the conference's driving force who proposed the idea back in 2001, when she was first re-elected president.

"We also wanted to introduce them to our union and harness their energy and ideas."

"I definitely lost the 'rah rah picket line' idea of being part of a union," says 20-year-old Malaspina University College student Julia MacDuff.

"I really enjoyed it," she says, "when Debra McPherson said 'the union is not something that exists in a building in Burnaby. It's us. They can cut our wages and rip up our contracts. But as long as we have a living and breathing union, we are strong.'"

BCNU began laying the foundation for the conference by consulting with other unions and with young BCNU members and nursing students. A working group was organized to discuss and share ideas and a survey was sent out to 50 people who applied to attend the conference.

Out of those discussions, BCNU hired a diverse group of young activists as peer facilitators to guide the conference's activities. With help provided by eight BCNU Council members who attended the event, the facilitators ran a diverse series of small workshops.

"I loved it when we broke into smaller groups where I didn't know anyone," says Lisa Keech, a 32-year-old



nursing student at Nanaimo's Malaspina University College. "I value diversity and love to meet new people and examine their issues."

Langman says the workshops "allowed for the generation of ideas, the sharing of experiences and the forming of relationships amongst participants."

Another conference highlight was a panel led by three young and inspirational speakers: Natasha Goudar, who spoke of her experiences as a youth rep with the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour; Shelley Lefurgey, who described how she became a steward in Castlegar; and Joan Pham, a UBC nursing student who talked about what she learned during a recent trip to New York City, where she volunteered with nurses at an immigrant resource centre.

"The panel of speakers was very inspirational," says 23-year-old UBC nursing student Jamie Roots.

"They are proof," she says, "that getting involved in life can be a wonderful thing."

Roots says the young nurses' conference helped her better understand "what BCNU does, how it represents and advocates for nurses and, most importantly, that each and every one of us actually makes up the





union, and makes sure it continues to meet our needs.”

BC Federation of Labour president Jim Sinclair also attended the event, as did CFNU president Linda Silas, who discussed the recommendations of the 2003 Canadian Nursing Advisory Committee’s report.

Conference participants, who came from across BC, had numerous opportunities to speak out about issues while attending the small workshops, during the plenary meetings, in one-on-one meetings with BCNU Council members and by writing comments in the main hall on everything from their very worst nursing experiences to the barriers that keep them from participating in the BC Nurses’ Union.

“The conference far exceeded all of my expectations,” points out Keech. “I felt, at first, that it would be a rally of sorts to get students to be more vocal. It was far more than that.”

Langman, like many other of the participants, would like to see information about BCNU become a formal part of nursing school curriculums: “The reality of nursing is that nursing is politics, and therefore we need to educate young nurses with an appreciation for this concept.”

So what happens next? BCNU Council members say they have already been contacted by youth conference participants.

Some of them have already offered to become stewards, others want to take BCNU’s Building Union Solidarity workshop and others want to know when they can attend the next union meeting or rally against BC Liberal health care cuts.

Selkirk College student Langman



A NEW GENERATION Conference participants, including from left, Shelley Lefurgey, Carl Meadows, Natasha Goudar, Joan Pham and Meaghan Thumath, are ready to get active.

says the conference “gave me an awareness of the concepts of leadership and activism. Though I am unsure of what sort of defined role I want to play in the union, such as being a steward, I do know that it increased my likelihood of being active and vocal in what I believe in.”

Keech says she now plans to become a BCNU activist.

“I feel I have some of the leadership qualities it takes to play a more active role in BCNU. I have a natural ability to rally my troops and would love the opportunity to take the BUS course as soon as possible.”

She hopes BCNU holds future youth conferences. “Being involved with other students and nurses really invigorated me to facilitate change in the health care system. I now realize BCNU shares my own values, beliefs and morals regarding patient and nurse care.”

Look for more stories from students and young nurses in future issues of *Update* magazine. □