

Making their marks

They have taken different paths—one crisscrosses the country, the other has spent almost two decades in the same lab—but both represent the best of the School of Nursing.



A CAREER TARGETING CANCER MARY GARLICK ROLL, BS '84, MS '88

Her six weeks of clinical experience at Roswell Park Cancer Institute as a student set Mary Garlick Roll on a 30-year career course dedicated to oncology nursing.

She spent the first 15 years bedside at Roswell and the last 15 on the ground floor of cancer drug development with various pharmaceutical companies.

Between cross-country trips in her role as clinical science liaison with global biopharmaceutical company Celgene, the Buffalo native spoke of her passion for the profession and UB's role in it.

"I liked the idea that UB and Roswell combined their activities so that we were able to have internships at Roswell," she says. "We were able to combine the science with actual clinical applications so it was an incredibly good experience. This is a good nursing school—everybody in the country

knows that. It's a place that you're proud to graduate from. The University at Buffalo master's program has a good reputation in the country among research facilities, so that only adds to my credentials."

At Celgene, Roll coordinates investigator-initiated trials with physician-scientists who approach the company about possible interest in testing a drug they're developing.

"It's been amazing with some of the drugs that have come on the market in the last couple of years," she observes. "A drug I work with at Celgene has survival advantage for the very first time ever in MDS (myelodysplastic syndromes). Slowly but surely we're finding drugs that are changing the way we look at cancer treatment. These drugs are essentially targeted therapy, targeting a particular site on or near or inside the cancer cell."

In addition to assisting with proposals for drug development, a significant part of

Roll's pharmaceutical career has involved education. "I've been the person responsible for talking to the nurses about the new drugs, side effect management, and the science of the drugs," she says. "The important thing is to make sure that the nurses understand what's new and what their role is in it."

Roll has presented more than 1,000 lectures related to cancer and cancer topics.

She has been president of the Oncology Nursing Society (ONS), the largest professional cancer member organization in the world. "ONS is very influential in futuristic thinking about where cancer care needs to go and the role of the nurse in that arena," she explains.

Roll recently returned to UB as a member of the board of directors of the UB Alumni Association. She serves on the government relations committee and is part of the strategic planning process. "I totally believe in UB 2020. We need a knowledge-

based economy and the university can provide that,” she reasons. “Times are hard but we need to invest in the university. And that can only turn around and help as well with the nursing shortage and nursing faculty shortage. Now’s not the time to be cutting back.”

Roll’s stake in UB is a family affair. Her husband, Roger, serves on the board of directors for UB Athletics Development. They live in a 168-year-old house (“a constant work in progress”) in Williamsville that also serves as her office between her almost weekly trips. They have two children and three grandchildren (“the joy of our lives”) and are avid runners (“he runs about ten times faster but I run for the fun of it”).

She is excited by the inroads being made conquering cancer and is hopeful for the promise that President Obama made during the campaign to double the cancer research budget. “I think there are possibilities here to do some amazing things in the next few years,” she says. “Now that we know a lot about DNA and about some molecular targets, I think this will just move the whole field forward. I feel fortunate to be involved in this at a ground level in many ways.”

IMPROVING MS TREATMENT COLLEEN MILLER, MS, ’91, DNS ’97

Fresh out of UB with her master’s degree, Colleen Miller applied for the position of clinical nurse specialist in the Neurology Department of Buffalo General Hospital in February 1991. Lawrence Jacobs, head of the department and a pioneering researcher in multiple sclerosis, asked her what she knew of MS. “I know for sure that’s something I don’t ever want to get,” she replied.

Despite her lack of knowledge of the disease, Miller demonstrated a willingness to work with the research and help care for people with MS. Jacobs sensed a budding chemistry with the engaging, energetic individual and thought she would be the right person for the job.

And so, until he died in November 2001, Miller worked very closely with Jacobs, who became mentor, friend, and hero.

“Dr. Jacobs was a consummate teacher and a very supportive person for nurses,” she says. “He taught me everything about MS and also all of neurology because we also took care of neurology patients at Roswell, Buffalo General, and sometimes over at Millard. I was like his medical student for 11 years, which was just an amazing opportunity for me that I couldn’t have gotten anyplace else.”

Miller characterizes MS care at the time she started as “mainly hand-holding” because there were no treatments to affect the progress of the disease or prevent relapses. “It was actually our team here that developed one of the first treatments to slow down disability in multiple sclerosis and decrease relapses and I was on the ground floor of doing that research with Dr. Jacobs,” she recalls.

They shared an interest in phenomenology, a qualitative research method focusing on the source of experience, which Miller had learned from School of Nursing professor Mary Ann Jezewski during her master’s pursuit. Jacobs would hold weekly phenomenological sessions with patients who would tell their stories to medical personnel. “We would go to the patients—the experts—and ask about their experience instead of making assumptions,” says Miller. “It not only helped us take better care of them but also to learn and frequently come up with a diagnosis that nobody had figured out before.”

As a nurse practitioner with the Jacobs Neurological Institute at Buffalo General, Miller, with the team, continues to make progress with treatment. Currently in the testing stage is an oral medication called BG-12, a medicine that Miller feels holds much hope. “It looks to have a lot of effect on MRI as well as decreasing relapses and inflammation. It may also have a role in protecting the nervous system and helping with repair. It’s a very attractive option for many people, seeing that now the only treatments for MS are injectables or infusables.”



Colleen Miller

And there are many other research studies in progress, according to Miller, all carrying forth the work of Lawrence Jacobs, bringing a cure closer. Miller recalls one of her mentor’s last statements. “When he was dying, and he knew he didn’t have a lot of time, he said, ‘You know, Colleen, if God could just give me three more years I know I could figure this out.’”

How close are we to conquering MS? “That would be a huge guess but we’ve actually come to a point where we can identify parts of the genes that are involved. We can diagnose early and treat early. We’re getting some ideas of what might be causing these things. There are some viruses that are suspect. Even Vitamin D is suspect. These are all things that we never considered,” says Miller.

“There’s so much good research that I think by the time I retire, which hopefully won’t be too long, that we’ll have this figured out. And this is what I tell my patients: My job is to keep you well enough so that when we figure out the cure, you’re well enough to benefit from it. I really do believe that’s coming.”

—Jim Bisco