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SON alum's passion for nursing leads to helping the elderly

The day Oakland University caught up with Judi Ganton, SON '78, she had dropped everything to respond to an immediate crisis. The \$7 million assisted-living complex slated to open that week was held up in bureaucratic red tape, potentially stalling the opening. She had 80 employees ready to start work and residents set to move in. Despite the sudden upheaval, she refused to get frazzled. Instead she looked for options — opportunities to learn.

"I've spent the whole morning trying to move the process along. The state requirements are rough but they're there to protect the residents. The process means I am learning something new every day," said the chief operating officer of Ganton Retirement Centers, Inc., a family-owned company which offers independent living in dignified community settings with supportive health care services.

Ganton became involved in long-term care in 1993 when she married Lloyd Ganton, who then owned a skilled nursing care center, some independent apartments and semi-independent centers in Spring Arbor, Mich. She had already distinguished herself in Southeastern Michigan as a dedicated nurse, strong leader and innovator of community health care services. A new opportunity to make a difference in geriatrics intrigued her.

"I researched assisted-living and it led to so much more," she said. Putting all her energy to work, she designed, staffed and developed policies and procedures for her company's first assisted-living facility in 1995. Now the company operates four independent senior housing complexes, three semi-independent complexes, four full assisted-living centers, two Alzheimer centers and a nursing home and hospice house.

"We have every level of senior housing," said Ganton. "It's important to me to provide exemplary care and housing for seniors and a good working atmosphere for employees."

She believes a good administrator must be engaged in all aspects of the business. "I'm very hands on," said Ganton, who spends as much time visiting her facilities as she does in the corporate offices. "I love working with the nurses and I talk to the residents often to determine new ways to meet their needs. I was at church Sunday and one resident in her 90s was having difficulty attending, but didn't want to miss service. We got her a radio so she could listen to the service every Sunday. I may not be passing out meds anymore, but I still feel I am personally caring for the residents because I am creating a positive, healthy environment for them."

Ganton's positive enthusiasm was just as evident during her years at OU's SON. Although she was in her 30s and a mother of three, including a newborn, she designed the class pin, edited the yearbook and served as vice president of the Student Nurses Association and president of the National Honor Society of Nursing.

"I graduated from OU's first nursing program and it was a fantastic experience," says the 2001 Nightingale Award winner. "The training was very challenging and we had many of the same instructors from beginning to end, which made the learning process very personal."

After graduating, she worked as a floor charge nurse at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital. She then joined the Oakland County Health Department, where she designed a mobile breast cancer detection unit that increased the survival rate of women — an achievement she considers her single greatest career accomplishment.

She became interested in cancer detection when she had her own harrowing experience. "I had a tumor on my esophagus and, although it was not cancerous, I went back to work with a different outlook on life. I wanted to make a difference in somebody's day. That was why I got involved in nursing in the first place," said Ganton, who at 66 has no intention of retiring any time soon.

Ganton makes a difference in many ways. She is actively involved in the National Honor Society of Nursing, the American Cancer Society and the United Way, among other organizations. Within her community, she helped raise \$1.8 million to build the Cascades Humane Society Shelter and Adoption Center, and built the Ganton Art Gallery. She also serves as vice president of Friends of Ella Sharp Museum and works in the nursery and welcome center at Spring Arbor Free Methodist Church.

"I believe in life balance and for me that means faith, family and community," she adds. "Nursing isn't just a position. You have to be well rounded and you need to be a life-long learner. Through it all we can keep nursing alive."

SUMMARY

Oakland University School of Nursing alum Judy Ganton's passion for learning has helped her to become a dedicated nurse, strong leader and innovator of community health care services.

Created by Katherine Land - Deleted (land@oakland.edu) on Wednesday, April 22, 2009

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