

SPOTLIGHT ON: DARCY DIFEDE, RN, BSN, FAHA

BY OR TODAY MAGAZINE | MAR 1, 2020 | FEATURES, MAGAZINE, SPOTLIGHT ON

By Matt Skoufalos



Darcy DiFede found her niche in nursing.

If there's any nurse who most personifies the adage that nurses are the masters of their own fates, it's Darcy DiFede.

A late entrant to the profession, DiFede worked in genetics, urology and cardiology before she considered nursing. As rewarding as her experiences in those fields had been, she believed a bachelor's degree would open up additional opportunities for her medical career to flourish.

“I said, ‘I want to control my own destiny,’ ” DiFede said. “The only way I was able to do that was to finish a degree, and know that it’s something that I owned.”

She enrolled in the University of Miami to study biomedical engineering, a decision that turned out to be short-lived. However, being a full-time college student with a full-time job and three children at home made DiFede “have to pick and choose what you really want to do.”

“I really loved research, but I said, ‘the only way I’m going to be able to make this happen is by doing nursing,’ ” she said. “From day one, I didn’t want to be a bedside nurse, but wanted to find that niche that not a lot of nurses are looking at when they go to nursing school.”

While seeking out her niche, other circumstances in DiFede’s life confirmed her decision to transition into nursing. While she was working at the University of Miami, her brother-in-law received a Stage IV cancer diagnosis. DiFede kept him company throughout 18 rounds of chemotherapy.

“I was his guardian angel, and he basically told me, ‘You’re awesome at this,’ ” she remembered. “He said, ‘You need to finish your career and be the best nurse you could be because I couldn’t stay here if it wasn’t for you.’ ”

“He didn’t have a fighting chance to live, and my wish was for other patients to have opportunities, through research, to have that fighting chance,” she said.

Although her brother-in-law died from the disease in 2004, DiFede moved into nursing as a full-time academic discipline – along with her responsibilities to her career and family – and “made it happen.”



Darcy DiFede's career has included travel to Morocco and the Bahamas.

DiFede found the intersection of her skill sets as a caregiver and scientific researcher while working at the interdisciplinary stem cell institute at the University of Miami, where techniques for coronary artery stem cell injections were pioneered. Amid a tri-hospital study, she was documenting patient experiences, shepherding them through the extensive process of clinical trials and contributing research to the advancement of next-generation treatment models. It was exactly where she wanted to be. “It just opened up the horizon of treating these patients with a therapy that was science fiction,” DiFede said. “I’d tell them, ‘You’re going on this journey, and I’m going to be there every step of the way with you.’ ”

DiFede said she excelled at helping patients understand what was required of them and guiding them through the process. She boasted a 100-percent compliance rate for patient retention because, in protecting the integrity of the study, she would travel to patients’ homes and bring them in if they didn’t turn up for treatment.

“Your data is the most important thing to help move the field forward, and that’s what gives the level of care and commitment you have to the patient,” DiFede said. “The patients knew that I was going to become part of their lives through the duration of their trial. Whether they were going to have open-heart surgery or they had to undergo a heart transplant, I would be there by their side. Whatever oversight, patients give their trust to you.” The prestige of working in such a cutting-edge field also supported her nursing career. Among the significant achievements of her 20 years at the University of Miami, DiFede counts her time teaching a clinical rotation for students at the university hospital. She instilled in her nurses the significance of the profession beyond bedside care, and the importance of keeping their roles “on an equal footing with physicians.”

“Have your own power, and respect follows,” she said.

“We have achieved a wonderful level of collaboration with physicians because everyone appreciates the work that stem cell nurses are doing,” DiFede said. “That input and level of care is what makes our physicians value us, what gains us respect in the field.”

By the time DiFede left the university, she had enrolled nearly 700 patients into clinical trials; as a testament to the strength of the relationships they formed, she still hears from many of them.

“You keep having these patients come back, and you become a patient advocate,” DiFede said. “It’s having the ability to give the patient the comfort and the knowledge to get them to understand the process.”

“I still have patients contacting me, and they’ll ask me, ‘What do you think about this group, that group, this doctor, that doctor?’” she said. “In my eyes, every patient is vulnerable, so I always took the extra care to help them make the best decisions for themselves and their families and their loved ones.”



Darcy DiFede enjoys sharing her knowledge with others.

When she did depart the university, DiFede transitioned into the biotech field to perform clinical trials overseas. She traveled to Morocco to help establish a hospital; traveled to the Bahamas to participate in stem cell trials there. Today she’s the COO for a startup called Regeniseff, working with birth products. Her passion still lies with seeking the best therapies for patients “in the most safe, regulated and appropriate manner for their health.”

“I have my nursing license, and because of that, I can give the best medicine that’s within my reach for my patients,” DiFede said.

“When you’re fresh out of college and you’re a nurse, your whole world is in front of you,” she said. “It’s such a varied career that the world is basically a sea of opportunities waiting to find your niche. You can be an LPN, an RN, a BSN; you can have your master’s, you can do a Ph.D. and have your own lab — the sky is the limit.”

“I’ve published so many papers; I’ve worked with the most brilliant scientists,” DiFede said. “At the end of the day, it’s you, the nurse, that controls the relationship you foster.”

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