



A Tribute to the Life & Legacy of Dr. Barbara L. Nichols

(July 19, 1939 – July 22, 2026)

A Visionary Leader Who Strengthened Wisconsin's Nursing Workforce

The Wisconsin Center for Nursing (WCN) mourns the passing of **Dr. Barbara L. Nichols, DL(h), DSc(h), PhD(h), MSN, RN, FAAN**, a transformational nurse leader, advocate, mentor, and trailblazer whose life's work profoundly shaped the nursing profession in Wisconsin, across the nation, and around the world.

Barbara believed deeply that nursing was more than a profession, it was a calling rooted in service, justice, and responsibility. As she often reminded us, *"Nursing is indeed a noble profession. We are there in people's moments of joy and trauma. That is a unique privilege. And because of that, our knowledge must match the depth of our responsibility."* That philosophy guided more than six decades of leadership dedicated to strengthening the nursing profession and improving the health of communities.

Her leadership was especially meaningful to the Wisconsin Center for Nursing. Joining WCN in 2015 as Diversity Coordinator and later serving as Executive Director until her retirement in 2025, Barbara advanced the Center's mission of assuring an adequate, well-prepared, and diverse nurse workforce for the people of Wisconsin. She understood that meeting Wisconsin's healthcare needs required more than increasing the number of nurses—it required investing in leadership, building meaningful partnerships, embracing diversity, strengthening nursing education, and using reliable workforce data to inform policy and action.

Barbara's work reflected each of WCN's five core areas of focus.

She championed **data** by leading the development and publication of Wisconsin's Registered Nurse, Licensed Practical Nurse and Nursing Education & Faculty Workforce Surveys. These reports became foundational resources for educators, employers, policymakers, researchers, and healthcare leaders working together to understand workforce trends and prepare for Wisconsin's future healthcare needs.

She was a lifelong advocate for **education**, believing that academic excellence and lifelong learning were essential to advancing nursing as a profession. During her presidency of the American Nurses Association, she courageously led the profession through difficult conversations supporting baccalaureate education as the standard for entry into professional nursing practice, recognizing that educational preparation strengthens both the profession and patient care.

Barbara's commitment to **diversity** defined her career. As the first Black president of both the Wisconsin Nurses Association and the American Nurses Association, she broke barriers that had

long limited opportunity while opening doors for generations of future nurse leaders. Throughout her career, she challenged nursing to become more inclusive, equitable, and reflective of the communities it serves. Her work as Diversity Consultant for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's implementation of *The Future of Nursing 2020–2030* further demonstrated her unwavering commitment to health equity and workforce diversity.

She believed that lasting progress required **partnerships**. Whether collaborating with healthcare organizations, educational institutions, professional associations, state agencies, or national foundations, Barbara understood that complex workforce challenges could only be solved when organizations worked together with a shared purpose. Her leadership strengthened relationships across Wisconsin and elevated WCN as a trusted convener of nursing workforce initiatives.

Above all, Barbara embodied **leadership**. She served with courage, conviction, and grace while never losing sight of nursing's responsibility to advocate for patients and communities. During her historic tenure as the first Black President of the American Nurses Association, she helped move nursing from the margins to the center of national healthcare policy, forging relationships with other healthcare organizations and ensuring that nurses had a voice where critical decisions were made. As Barbara often said, *"Nurses are the ones at the bedside, observing what is happening to people, and we need to have a say in it."*

Born in Maine in 1939, Barbara's journey began during a time when opportunities for Black nurses were limited. She graduated from the Massachusetts Memorial Hospital School of Nursing as one of only two Black students in her class, became the only Black registered nurse at Boston Children's Hospital, served as a head nurse in the U.S. Navy Nurse Corps, and ultimately made Wisconsin her home. Here, she became the first Black president of the Wisconsin Nurses Association before making history nationally as the first Black president of the American Nurses Association. Throughout her distinguished career she also served as Chief Executive Officer of CGFNS International, held numerous federal consulting appointments, served on the International Council of Nurses Board, authored more than 200 publications, and mentored countless nurses and emerging leaders around the globe.

Barbara's extraordinary contributions earned many of nursing's highest honors, including designation as a Living Legend of the American Academy of Nursing, induction into the American Nurses Association Hall of Fame, the University of Wisconsin–Madison Outstanding Woman of Color Award, the inaugural Canary Savage Girardeau Award for Health Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, and the American Academy of Nursing's Lifetime Achievement Award.

While these accomplishments are remarkable, those who knew Barbara will remember something even greater. They will remember her wisdom, humility, generosity, and unwavering belief in the potential of others. She inspired leaders to think boldly, encouraged nurses to find their voices, and reminded all of us that leadership is measured not by titles held but by lives changed.

Barbara's legacy lives on in every nurse she mentored, every student she inspired, every workforce initiative she advanced, every partnership she cultivated, and every policy she helped shape. Her



influence continues in the work of the Wisconsin Center for Nursing as we carry forward our mission to assure an adequate, well-prepared, and diverse nursing workforce for Wisconsin.

As we honor Barbara's life, we also reaffirm the vision she so passionately embraced, that **nurses in Wisconsin speak with one voice for nursing workforce issues**. Her leadership strengthened that voice, and her legacy will continue to guide it for generations to come.

We are profoundly grateful for Barbara Nichols' remarkable life of service. Her vision, courage, and commitment have left an enduring imprint on Wisconsin's nursing workforce and on the profession she loved so deeply.

About the Wisconsin Center for Nursing

The Wisconsin Center for Nursing (WCN) is a 501c3 non-profit organization that was created in 2006 to engage nurse and healthcare organizations, public and private academic programs, government agencies, and related service providers to work together as collaborative partners in an effort to ensure an adequate, competent, and diverse nursing workforce for the people of Wisconsin. Our mission is to critically assess and monitor nursing workforce and education trends and promote nursing career pathways with a focus on under-represented groups and leadership development. Learn more at www.wicenterfornursing.org.

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