

COMMUNITY HEALTH NURSING

3 Nurses Recognized by VNA Foundation

The VNA Foundation awarded nurses, Cat Quinn, Patricia Littlejohn and Lorraine Schoenstadt and presented them with cash awards for their exceptional service to the medically underserved community of the Chicago area.

story by Kathleen A. Henson, photos by Gary Irving



Catharine "Cat" Quinn, BSN, RNC, MPH



Patricia Littlejohn, RN



Lorraine C. Schoenstadt, BSN, MS, RN, BC

Although for many years she has lived on the city's west side working as a community health nurse serving predominantly Hispanic families, **Catharine "Cat" Quinn** doesn't limit the "community" she serves to just Chicago or even the U.S.

Quinn sees her nursing role as a global one, with a passion for supporting needy communities not only in Chicago but all over the world. Her remarkable enthusiasm for her work, her experiences as a local community health practitioner, and her unique view of community nurse as advocate are a

few reasons why Quinn was chosen as winner of the 2006 VNA Foundation Super Star in Community Nursing Award and recipient of a \$25,000 unrestricted cash award. Now in its fifth year, the VNA Foundation's "Super Star" award recognizes significant contributions to community and public health nursing – an often unglamorous and under-rewarded career choice within the nursing profession, despite great need.

Quinn first decided to dedicate her life's work to helping the underserved at the age of 16. In the

mid 1980's, she volunteered with Travelers and Immigrants Aid (TIA) in Chicago, serving on a mobile health clinic run by nurses. She spent a summer visiting local communities and working with the homeless – specifically homeless teens. The experience crystallized Quinn's career path and she immediately decided to devote her time to working with patients that don't have access to health, schools, homes – or in some cases – basic human rights.

Quinn's career choice has kept her traveling

throughout the world providing community nursing services to the underserved. She entered nursing school in the late 1980's when the nursing shortage was in full swing. Undeterred, she spent summer vacations volunteering overseas in England working with adults with disabilities and also in Honduras at a hospice treating patients with HIV. After earning a BSN from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Quinn began working inside Chicago's Cabrini Green neighborhood at the Winfield Moody Health Center. In 1994, she was offered a grant by the San Carlos Foundation in Berkeley, CA which sent her to San Pedro Sula, Honduras where she learned fluent Spanish and spent two years as a case manager for adults and children living with HIV and AIDS. In Honduras, Quinn also helped open a community-based home for HIV positive children with the support of the Mercy Sisters. She went on to work with California-based Concern America, as a community health nurse in a rural health development project in Peten, Guatemala, facilitating workshops for health promoters and midwives. In fact, it was in the jungle of Guatemala that Quinn and her husband – with the help of a local midwife – gave birth to their first child. After returning to the U.S. in 1995, Quinn worked at El Valor Corporation in Chicago as a bilingual nurse case manager for 250 local Head Start families and went on to become the only Spanish-speaking nurse at Community Health, a free clinic serving the uninsured population in Chicago.

One of Quinn's most memorable jobs was her role as the health educator and community nurse at the Lakeview Health Center in one of the city's predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods. During the five years at the school-based health center, Quinn taught sex education classes, prenatal classes and mentored hundreds of young Latinas. Quinn was such a positive influence on the young women that she co-founded the Latina Girls Club at Lakeview High School, a project created by and for young Latina students. Still active today, the girls explore options for their future that enable understanding of their heritage and how to take control of their lives and make informed choices about their futures. As a testament to Quinn's support and mentoring, many of the club's graduates have pursued nursing as a career.

Quinn is currently designing the International Health Immersion Program for Concern America, a unique nonprofit, nonsectarian, nongovernmental

development and refugee aid organization emphasizing the transference of skills, rather than just the placement of aid, into impoverished regions.

Quinn recently earned her Masters of Science from the School of Public Health, Health, Policy and Administration at the University of Illinois' Chicago campus. Earlier this year, she served as the Chicago delegate for the World Social Forum in Caracas, Venezuela and was a delegate from the United States for the 2005 Peoples Health Movement Assembly in Cuenca, Ecuador.

"Over the past four years of sponsoring this award, we have reviewed the credentials of some incredible 'super stars' in community health nursing," said **Robert DiLeonardi**, executive director of the VNA Foundation of Chicago. "I do not recall, however, encountering before a nurse like Cat Quinn. She exhibits such an undeniable enthusiasm and is such a passionate advocate within the health community.... Cat is truly a remarkable inspiration to others who are considering a career in community nursing."

"Nursing to me is truly about being an activist and advocate for all," said Quinn. "I have always believed we have a responsibility as nurses to learn about different cultures, religions and languages. You need to be an activist in community nursing and sit at the global table to learn why people are without health care, hungry and in places of violence without schooling. Only then can you make a difference."

The VNA Foundation also awarded one Super Star runner-up an unrestricted \$5,000 cash award. **Patricia Littlejohn**, RN, spends her days fighting against the spread of HIV and AIDS in Chicago. As a primary care nurse in the adolescent medicine program at Chicago's CORE Center on the city's west side, Littlejohn coordinates the clinic serving predominantly African American and Hispanic children and young adults living with HIV and AIDS. Littlejohn works with gang members, drug users and other challenged youth helping them deal with their HIV or AIDS diagnosis and providing much-needed medical and emotional support. In addition to their HIV status, many of the youth visiting the CORE Center also suffer from multiple psychosocial issues including homelessness and housing instability, psychiatric disorders and substance abuse. Through it all, Littlejohn has become known for her nearly inexhaustible compassion and sincerity. She has earned patients' trust by helping them cope with life-threat-

ening health issues, and to do so with dignity and self-confidence. She also supports patients by educating them about contraception, abstinence and adherence to antiretroviral medications. She works with other medical staff members at the center to understand the unique medical needs of these youth by maintaining clinical information critical to their care including biological markers of HIV disease progression, immunizations, STD screens and PAP smears.

In addition, one finalist received a \$1,000 unrestricted cash award. **Lorraine C. Schoenstadt**, BSN, MS, RN, BC, an immunization education coordinator, has spent her entire 21-year career as a public health nurse within the Chicago Department of Public Health. Her days have included in-home visits with low-income mothers and babies, providing care to drug exposed and/or chronically ill infants, offering immunization services to the uninsured and providing nursing support in local communities. In all of her various roles, Schoenstadt has demonstrated vision, determination and compassion for her staff and patients.

As the current education coordinator for the Immunization Program, Schoenstadt is often asked to evaluate the quality of immunization services provided in CDPH and non-CDPH clinical settings. She also has a long history of volunteerism to provide nursing services in emergency situations. Schoenstadt administered vaccines during the 1989-90 measles outbreak, volunteered to be vaccinated with and administered smallpox vaccines in 2002, and provided meningococcal vaccine during the 2003 outbreak. Schoenstadt also volunteers as a mentor for Rush University nursing students at community health events as part of the RU Caring Program (a student-run interdisciplinary community service project). She is also vice president of the Chicago Nurses Association, District 1.

Since 1995, The VNA Foundation has operated exclusively as a grant-making foundation, supporting nonprofit organizations offering home- and community-based care to the medically underserved. In fiscal year 2006, the VNA Foundation distributed 59 grants totaling \$2,028,067 in support of its mission. Grant recipients include a variety of agencies providing health care and health services to the homeless, the working poor and the disenfranchised. To discover more information on the VNA Foundation, visit www.vnafoundation.net. ♦