

An Interview with Nancy Colobong Smith, President of the American Nephrology Nurses Association (2024-2025)

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Beth Ulrich: Hi, my name is Beth Ulrich. I'm the Editor-in-Chief of the *Nephrology Nursing Journal* and a Past President of ANNA. Today, it is my honor to interview Nancy Colobong Smith who is our new President of ANNA. Nancy, welcome.

Nancy Colobong Smith: Thank you. Beth, it's pleasure to be here.

Beth Ulrich: We want to learn a little bit about you. Let's start off at the beginning. Where did you grow up? Where's home?

Nancy Colobong Smith: Home for me is Seattle, Washington. I was born and raised there. My parents immigrated to the United States from the Philippines. My dad was a doctor. My mom was an accountant. And they both met in Seattle and married and started their family there.

Beth Ulrich: Tell me about what it was like for you growing up.

Nancy Colobong Smith: Growing up for me was my big family. My dad is one of nine children. I have a lot of uncles and aunts and cousins. And we spent time with my extended family. I went to parochial school. That was very important to my mother. And I did different clubs, volunteered at hospitals, did a little bit of dance. It was a pretty regular kind of childhood.

Beth Ulrich: Your start in nursing was volunteering at a hospital?

Nancy Colobong Smith: A little bit before that actually. My mother had a health issue when I was in middle school; it was pretty serious, and it took her about a year to recover. During that time, I helped to care for her.

Beth Ulrich: I guess that's how a lot of us got started. We were a nurse to a person or a pet, and that brought out the early nursing instincts, right?

Nancy Colobong Smith: Yes, and it was something I always kind of enjoyed. I have uncles and aunts who are nurses, and my father is a doctor. As far back as I can

Editor-in-Chief's Note: I had the privilege of interviewing Nancy Colobong Smith, who became the President of the American Nephrology Nurses Association on April 16, 2024. This is a transcript of the interview. The audio version of this interview is available as part of the NNJ Extra podcast.

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remember, I liked to bandage and stitch up my stuffed animals. So taking care of my mother wasn't anything new per se, but I definitely got to observe nursing first-hand and see the parts of it that I really appreciated. It helped develop the kind of nurse that I wanted to be.

Beth Ulrich: Where did you go to nursing school?

Nancy Colobong Smith: I went to nursing school at the University of Washington. I received my Bachelor of Science in Nursing there. Several years later, I came back and got my Master's in nursing. I had a dual focus. I was in the acute care nurse practitioner program and the advanced practice specialist – a CNS program.

Beth Ulrich: Interesting! Were a lot of people doing the dual program when you did it?

Nancy Colobong Smith: Not a lot. No. It was one of those things [where] I was interested in both tracks and didn't know which to apply for, so I applied to both thinking they would let me into one program, hopefully. And they responded with, well, we have a dual track, and you could do both at the same time.

Beth Ulrich: So you were an overachiever early on!

Nancy Colobong Smith: Yes, my family would agree with you.

Beth Ulrich: Tell me about your path to nephrology nursing.

Nancy Colobong Smith: I came into nephrology nursing very early in my career. I started as a nurse technician. Actually, I was still in my BSN program, and there weren't a lot of openings. I know this is going to sound very strange to people now, but at the time I graduated from nursing

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school, there weren't a lot of openings, especially if you were new. So my options at the time for being a nurse technician were the neuro unit or the med-surg/transplant unit (liver and kidney transplants). Looking at those two options, I went with liver and kidney transplant. I was a nurse technician there, and I learned to love that specialty – to see people post-transplant, how excited and happy they were, and with a new lease on life. Then I started nursing there when I graduated from my nursing program, and I never left [nephrology].

Beth Ulrich: Well, you were in Seattle, Washington, the birthplace of hemodialysis and nephrology care, right?

Nancy Colobong Smith: That is true. I am in Seattle, and it was the birthplace, and I learned a lot more about that as time went on. So first I learned about transplant. After that I was trained as a charge nurse and a hemodialysis nurse. And PD and SLED and apheresis. After a period of time, I became the assistant nurse manager of the dialysis and transplant unit. That's when I learned that I really enjoyed educating and mentoring new staff as well as giving direct care, and I wanted to be able to manage that care myself, which is part of the reason why I applied for the nurse practitioner program as well as the clinical nurse specialist track. Not only did I want to take care of patients, but I wanted to take care of populations – the nephrology population specifically.

Beth Ulrich: You've been a really active member of ANNA, and now you're the President. When did you join ANNA and why did you join?

Nancy Colobong Smith: I joined ANNA right after I trained to be a hemodialysis nurse. My mentor at the time handed me an application and said, "This would be good for you." So I filled it out, and she turned it in, and I've been a member ever since. It was also good because she was telling me about certification. I work in a Magnet[®] hospital, and they give extra pay for certification, so she said, "Start collecting your continuing education credits now so that you can become certified." And so I did two years later.

Beth Ulrich: How did you get from being volunteered as a member to being President of the association?

Nancy Colobong Smith: It's a long road. It started off with becoming a member, going to events locally, and then eventually being invited to be on the planning committee of our local chapter's education group. Then, after I finished grad school, some of the members of the chapter took me out to dinner and said, "How about you become president of the chapter?" So I went to my first ANNA

National Symposium meeting and went to the Volunteer Leadership Workshop. That was in 2008. It was my first time at National, and I loved it! I saw so many things that were new to me, and I watched a lot of people who I found inspiring. It was very eye-opening. And so, after being a chapter officer for several years, I was asked if I was interested in helping with the ANNA Chapter Support Team (ACST). I was an ACST Leader with them, and after a couple of years, became the ACST Chair. And while being the ACST Chair, I met a lot of people on the ANNA Board. They encouraged me to run for the Board, and I served on the Board as a Director for four years. I took a gap year, and then, after some encouragement, and some thinking and talking with my family and my employer, I ran for President-Elect of ANNA.

Beth Ulrich: You know, that's a really important part point that you make about having the support of your family and having the support of your employer. I don't think any president does it by themselves. That support is critical for you to be able to do both your own job and to be President of ANNA, which is a much bigger job than I think most people realize.

ANNA has really influenced my career with mentors and friends who saw things in me that maybe I didn't see, and encouraged me to try new things that I probably would not have tried.

Nancy Colobong Smith: I agree with you. My family support has been meaningful because it's not only my time, it's my time away from them. It's how I'm spending my time and the same with my work. I manage our in-house dialysis program with all of our own staff, so in total, I probably have almost 200 trained hemodialysis, peritoneal dialysis, and CRRT nurses. Being able to step away and come back, and step away and come back takes a lot of support from everybody in order to do this work, but I'm excited to do it. I believe in nephrology nursing. I believe in ANNA's mission, so it was important for me to be able to do that appropriately and give it my best. I've had a lot of people supporting me. It's really, really a blessing.

Beth Ulrich: Let's talk about ANNA members. What do you think are the biggest opportunities and challenges for individual nephrology nurses in the coming year?

Nancy Colobong Smith: I think one of the biggest opportunities for individual nephrology nurses this year is to leverage our position as the most trusted profession and to improve conditions for nurses. I think that's both an opportunity as well as a challenge because in the nursing profession right now, a lot of the nurses – especially in direct care – are tired. It's been a tough several years. We're learning how to take care of ourselves and be safe in this new space that we're working in that's unlike what I've seen throughout the last 30 years. I think it's both an opportunity and a challenge, so advocating for ourselves, using the

leverage that we have, and still trying to heal and take care of ourselves while we're doing it.

Beth Ulrich: What are the biggest opportunities and challenges for ANNA as an organization in the coming year, and nephrology as a profession and a specialty?

Nancy Colobong Smith: In nephrology as a specialty, it's a challenge and an opportunity. It's workforce. We have had a lot of our colleagues retiring during the last several years or stepping away from nursing. Specialties like nephrology that are not as often recognized by nursing students or the general public as a specialty, unlike some of the other specialties that are very flashy and attractive. I volunteer at a nurse camp, so I hear potential nursing students talk, and there's a lot of interest in babies and there's a lot of interest in things that are flashy, like flight nursing, intensive care units, emergency rooms. But the kidney is not as flashy to them. An opportunity for us is really to highlight nephrology, highlight the great work that we do, and highlight the benefits of becoming a nephrology nurse. I mean, what other specialty gets to be so autonomous and work with patients throughout their lifespan? There are nephrology nurses who work in pediatrics, kidney health prevention, and through very acute and ICU-type care to palliative care. We get to see people through this whole process of life and build those relationships with them and their families. It's super exciting and I think should be a more recognized specialty. It's an opportunity for us to lead and to show what nephrology is and how great it is. It's also an opportunity for us to be innovative and get that message out on how we get our work done when there's less of us than there were before and how to grow our profession. And it's also important to me, as the first Asian American nephrology nurse to be an ANNA President, that we continue to work on including and belonging for all our different members. I might be the first, but I definitely don't want to be the last. I think we need to have a lot more firsts. That's how we're going to continue to grow is when our leadership, and I mean that in my workplace as well as in ANNA, looks like our membership and our communities. It's good for our patients. It's good for us. And I want us all to be seen and heard.

Beth Ulrich: Absolutely! Before we end, what else would you like to share about your nephrology nursing experiences? Any other thoughts? Maybe how your work with ANNA influenced your career?

Nancy Colobong Smith: One thing to start off with is my first exposure to peritoneal dialysis outside of work was

Nephrology is the best!
The kidneys are rock stars!

when I was about 5 years old. My father unfortunately was not able to work as a physician when he immigrated to the United States, but he still wanted to work in health care. He was trained by Dr. Belding Scribner to be a dialysis technician. He worked at the University of Washington, and he made dialysate the way they did at the time – with powdered electrolytes and water – and tested it and set up machines. Also, at that time, they still used glass peritoneal dialysis bottles. When the bottles got discarded, sometimes they would just be like, “Whoever wants them can have them.” So my first goldfish aquarium was a glass PD bottle.

Beth Ulrich: That's amazing! No wonder you're the President of ANNA. Your DNA comes from Dr. Belding Scribner teaching your dad, right?

Nancy Colobong Smith: I was fortunate enough to meet Dr. Scribner.

Beth Ulrich: He was a great man.

Nancy Colobong Smith: Another thing that I wanted to share in closing – apply for scholarships! I have to tell you, ANNA has really influenced my career with mentors and friends who saw things in me that maybe I didn't see, and encouraged me to try new things that I probably would not have tried. I met wonderful people who encouraged me and helped me. And when my family was having a challenging time and my husband was laid off and I was in grad school, it was the ANNA scholarship that helped me finish my Master's. I just needed that one last quarter, and my ANNA scholarship was there. And I have continued to volunteer within ANNA since because that made a huge difference for my family and my career. If I can give even a little bit of that back, I'm so happy to do so.

Beth Ulrich: Let's finish with one question. Finish this sentence. I love nephrology nursing because...

Nancy Colobong Smith: Why shouldn't I? Nephrology is the best! The kidneys are rock stars!

Beth Ulrich: Nancy, thank you for allowing us to interview you. We very much appreciate you taking the time to talk with us and we look forward to your leadership as President of ANNA.

Nancy Colobong Smith: Thank you, Beth.