early 19 years have passed since our son Patrick died of complications of idiopathic thrombocytopenia, an autoimmune disease, and we created The DAISY Award for Extraordinary Nurses. AONE has played an important role in our journey—a journey that has brought a meaningful recognition program dedicated to nurses to over 3,200 health care facilities and schools of nursing, throughout the United States and in 18 other countries. This is a story of collaboration between a grieving family and a professional organization that was the first organization to help us see the value in a concept we designed to say thank you to nurses for the extraordinary care we experienced during our Patrick’s 8-week hospitalization in late 1999. Today, 30 professional associations support our work. But it was AONE who first provided the guidance of nursing leadership to make our vision a reality. Their support in our early years, when we really needed help, boosted this work and brought DAISY to light for the entire nursing profession.
Most of you know our story: Patrick was 33. He and his wife, Tena, had just given us our first grandchild, Riley, only 6 weeks before he developed symptoms. We went to help while Pat was hospitalized, thinking he’d be there for a few days. How wrong we were. His death came 8 weeks later, following a roller coaster of hope and despair. How in the world could our family cope with this depth of heartache? How could we find something positive to pull ourselves out of the worst possible experience? We found the answers in our gratitude to the nurses who cared for Patrick—and for us—when he was in the hospital. We had expected their clinical excellence. But we were blown away by their compassionate, sensitive caring, and kindness to us all. And so was born The DAISY Foundation. Tena came up with the name, an acronym for Diseases Attacking the Immune System, so that Patrick would always be at the heart of this program.

We brought our idea for an ongoing recognition program for nurses to the hospital that cared for Pat for the last weeks of his life—the University of Washington Medical Center/Seattle Cancer Care Alliance (UWMC/SCCA). The nurse managers in the bone marrow transplant unit that cared for Pat were kind to us as they listened to our concept for The DAISY Award: Nurses would nominate each other for their extraordinary care. A committee of nurses would choose a nurse to be honored each month. We think the managers saw this as a means of helping to heal our hearts (which it was), so they agreed to pilot it. We learned very quickly that nurses nominating nurses was not going to work. Nurses didn’t see in each other what we as a patient’s family see: every day, nurses think they are just doing their jobs. We, however, see them saving lives, comforting patients and families with extraordinary acts of kindness, giving of themselves, even when they have nothing left to give. Nurses are heroes to their patients. Nurses just don’t realize it. So, when nurses did not nominate each other, we asked UWMC/SCCA to open nominations to patients and families. The emotional stories of outstanding care, told by the voices of recipients of that care, rolled in. Nurses on the selection committee struggled to choose among them each month.

Following the launch at UWMC/SCCA, working out of our home, we called hospitals around the United States, offering the gift of recognition, funded mostly by us and a few angel-friends. During our calls to hospitals, we shared our experience of extraordinary nurses and invited chief nursing officers (CNOs) to adopt our program of ongoing recognition for above-and-beyond compassionate care. From many nurse leaders we spoke to, the slightly skeptical response was, “Are you for real? You want to do what? At no cost?” From others, the response was, “I’ve heard about your program. Thank you for inviting us! How do we start?” Mark spent his days in his small office, packing boxes of DAISY gifts—pins, certificate portfolios, our beautiful Healers Touch sculptures that we were buying from artists in Zimbabwe. The noise of his packing tape permeated the house all day. We tried to go to the first presentation at every hospital, so we were traveling like crazy. What we saw in the hospitals we visited was a program that went way beyond the simple concept we had designed. Nurses brought their creativity and resourcefulness to DAISY, making beautiful handcrafted displays for nomination collection boxes and awareness-building posters. They blinded the nominations and developed thoughtful selection criteria against which to judge the nominations. A hospital showed us the simple daisy pin they gave to every nominee, along with a copy of the nomination. We adopted that idea to help fulfill our goal of ongoing recognition. This was another thing for Mark to pack and ship. But over time, we came to understand how important recognizing nominees would be to those nurses whose patients and families took the time to say thank you to them by sharing their story.

We built a board of family members and a few very special nurse executives who understood the strategic value of The DAISY Award better than we did. At a board retreat, hearing that we needed help, nurse executives Ann Evans, Mary Dee Hacker, and Jane Kamstra suggested we approach AONE to see if they would partner with us, providing resources we didn’t have. We knew about AONE. Somehow, in 2004, when we had 25 hospitals participating, they had gotten wind of DAISY and featured it in the Voice of Nursing Leadership. That had generated numerous inquiries to us. We knew the organization had marketing muscle to reach the people who could say yes to our invitation to honor nurses with The DAISY Award.

Board member Cindy Angiulo, then assistant administrator at UWMC, offered to call the AONE board member for the Northwest, Patty Crome. Patty agreed to forward an e-mail about DAISY to chief executive officer Pam Thompson, if we would write the note. How hard we worked on that e-mail, thinking through every word, hoping our passion for nurses would come across as strongly as we felt it. After multiple drafts, we clicked send, and our future was in Patty’s hands. Several days later, the response came: Pam and her team would be happy to meet with us in Chicago to discuss our program and how they might help. OMG!

Knowing how we slaved over that introductory e-mail, you can imagine how much thought we put into a presentation explaining our program and dreams for its future. With Pam in our meeting was MT Meadows, director of professional practice, and Sue Gergely, then director of operations, now senior vice president and chief people officer at the American Hospital Association. We shared a plan in which AONE would collaborate with us on logistics, hiring a staff member to support the outreach to hospitals interested in our program. We would continue to give The DAISY Award as a gift to hospitals. Pam looked across the conference table at us and said, “This business model has got to change.” She urged us to charge the hospitals a fee for this program to ensure its sustainability for the long-term. Have you ever tried to say no to Pam? We did. We said we needed to give this gift in memory of our son. Nurse leaders who had said to us time and again, “Are you for real?” would never pay for it. Pam politely explained why we were very wrong. Nurse leaders would pay for the program because the value and impact it was obviously providing were significant. A fee would indicate its value. Besides, AONE would bring The
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DAISY Award to many more hospitals than we could likely afford to fund. We finally agreed, and we priced 12 awards at $1,250 per year. We instituted the fee in January 2008, and we called each of the 182 CNOs who then had our program. Each one agreed to pay for the program. Not one thought the fee unreasonable, given the benefits DAISY was bringing their nurses. We were thrilled and not a little relieved.

We announced that The DAISY Award was now being presented in collaboration with AONE early in 2008, adding AONE’s logo to all our materials, including the big vinyl banner that hangs in the unit of the honoree, rotating around the hospital.

AONE hired a coordinator who worked half-time on DAISY and half on the new nurse manager fellowship program. Pam invited us to have a display at the annual meeting in Seattle. She positioned DAISY not in the exhibit hall, but in a location that demonstrated AONE’s support—right near registration. Attendees couldn’t miss our green booth, topped by a banner that read “Honor Your Extraordinary Nurses.” Pam called attention to DAISY at the business meeting. We must have told our story of why we are so passionate about nurses a thousand times during the conference. Nurse leaders were touched by our description of Patrick’s nurses and what they meant to us, and we were flooded with requests for information about The DAISY Award.

Clearly, our relationship with AONE was off to a stunning start. AONE gave us exposure to the right people—nurse leaders who were looking for innovative ways to retain great nurses. Leaders who knew that sharing nomination stories of extraordinary compassion provided exemplars of the behaviors that reflect their organization’s mission and values. Leaders who know, as we do, that nursing is as much an art as it is a science, and nurses must never let tasks and technology get in the way of the human-to-human touch that is unique to their profession and oh so important to our healing. AONE also gave us credibility with nursing leadership.

Leaders knew if AONE supported us, there must be something special about what we were doing.

The DAISY Award grew to many hundreds of hospitals, and the feedback we received from nurse leaders and DAISY Award honorees was so positive it took our breaths away. We realized we needed to understand better what our program was actually accomplishing for nurses and their organizations. We had plenty of anecdotal evidence, but it was time to delve more deeply into the impact of our program. AONE helped make this happen. At an AONE annual meeting, we attended a session by Laura Caramanica, then the CNO at Westchester Medical Center in New York. When the session was over, we went to congratulate Laura on her presentation. As we chatted, we mentioned that we would like to learn more about DAISY’s impact. Standing next to Laura, listening, was a nurse who piped up and said, “I know about your work. I’m an organizational psychologist, and I’d love to do that study for you.” And so was born a forever friendship with Dr. Cindy Lefton.

The idea of doing research was very exciting, but as full-time volunteers who run the Foundation very lean, we didn’t see how we could pay for a full-blown research study. Cindy volunteered her time and her company, Psychological Associates in St. Louis, to do this work, in 20 DAISY sites. This incredible gift, offered at an AONE annual meeting, gave us a literature review and evidence that Dr. Lefton presented at AONE and elsewhere around the country. She reached interested CNOs who needed more proof that The DAISY Award would accomplish something significant for their staff. This was the beginning of a robust body of evidence demonstrating DAISY’s impact.

Over time, no longer needing AONE’s administrative support, we hired our own team, including Patrick’s wife, Tena, our daughter-in-law, Melissa, and staff dedicated to bringing The DAISY Award to health care facilities and schools of nursing around the world. We brought on nurse Cynthia (Cindy) Sweeney, as our executive director.

In our travels to celebrate The DAISY Award and meet nurse leaders around the world, we heard often from nurse managers that they loved supporting The DAISY Award for their direct care nurses. They could see the difference it made in terms of retention, morale, and more. They understood our focus on direct care staff nurses, given our experience with Pat’s bedside nurses, but wouldn’t it be great if there was DAISY recognition for leaders? Of course! Nurse leaders create the environments where compassionate care thrives. There should be a DAISY Nurse Leader Award!

We talked to several nurse executives about the possibility of a DAISY Nurse Leader Award—recognition that would celebrate nurses who may not have direct care responsibility but without whom compassionate care would be impossible: nurse managers and directors, preceptors and educators, informatics nurses, even CNOs. One of the most meaningful conversations we had about this was with Linda Leavell, national executive director of Kaiser Permanente. She helped us craft the program and assured us it would have legs. We described the concept to MT Meadows, and she wholeheartedly agreed with Linda and others that this new rendition of DAISY recognition would be highly valued by nurse executives. There was no question where we would launch it. At the AONE annual meeting in 2016, we hosted a DAISY breakfast for our community’s CNOs, with Cindy Lefton presenting research. We announced The DAISY Nurse Leader Award, and it was off and running.

Pam Thompson’s retirement as AONE’s CEO was an emotional milestone for so many people, including us. Pam and AONE had helped launch DAISY, had supported us with staff when we needed help, and had taught us so much about the real value of our program, when we viewed it as simply our expression of gratitude to nurses for the care we had experienced during Patrick’s illness. How proud we were when AONE accepted our request to honor Pam onstage at her final AONE annual meeting, presenting our Friend of DAISY Award as a part of the surprise celebration of Pam’s incomparable contribution to nursing leadership.

After 10 years of collaboration with AONE, attending AONE’s annual meeting is still a thrill. Most of the members who visit our DAISY display now have our program and...
can’t wait to tell us in person how it is transforming their culture and impacting their staff. Many tell us about the most recent DAISY Award they presented, and we always have a good supply of tissues on hand, as they share the story of compassionate care provided by a nurse.

We are deeply proud of our relationships with all the nursing organizations that support and contribute to our work. But AONE was the first, and we will always be grateful beyond words for AONE’s introduction to nurse leaders who see the value of meaningful recognition, have adopted our program, and embedded DAISY in their cultures. We look forward to the next 10 years of collaboration and the achievement of our vision: Every organization in the world where nurses practice will want to embed DAISY recognition programs in their cultures since DAISY Awards inspire nurses to provide extraordinary care not only with their brains but also with their hearts.

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