

Carli Zegers: Leadership for a more inclusive future

By Jessica Stein Diamond

Childhood experiences forged Carli Zegers' determination to help make healthcare more inclusive and equitable.

"I've grounded myself in remembering where I'm from and keep that perspective in mind in everything I do," said Zegers, PhD, APRN, FNP-BC, recipient of the 2020 Jeannine Rivet National Leadership Fellowship established by the American Nurses Foundation through a gift from the United Health Foundation. "Advancing my leadership skills as a nurse is important so I can get to the next level to make sure that everyone's voices, especially underserved and vulnerable individuals, are heard."



Carli Zegers

Early influences

Zegers obtained her doctorate at age 29, and at 31 is currently working toward an MBA while participating in fellowship-supported leadership development courses and mentoring. "The only reason I'm here today is because of the exceptional people who took time to mentor me," said Zegers, who grew up in a low-socioeconomic community in South Omaha, Nebraska, and helped raise her younger sister and brother while her single mom, a high school graduate, worked two jobs around the clock. She vividly recalls her fifth grade teacher's advice: "The only way out of this lifestyle is through education because they can't take it from you."

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Today, Zegers works as an emergency department nurse practitioner at Truman Medical Center in Kansas City, Missouri, a safety-net hospital, and is an assistant professor at the University of Missouri Kansas City School of Nursing and Health Studies. She frequently replaces textbook case studies with real patient stories because, she explains, "Life doesn't always let you be a textbook answer." For example, instead of the standard blood transfusion case, her students discuss how to support the transfusion needs of an undocumented mother fleeing an abuser

whose four children had nowhere to go after she was admitted.

"We need to be unbiased for the patient and give them more power by sharing information in a calm, respectful, and caring interaction," Zegers said. Childhood memories and a relative's experience as an immigrant from Mexico shape her focus on effective communication in her service on the boards of the Academy of Communication in Healthcare and the National Association of Hispanic Nurses.

Opening doors

Through the fellowship, Zegers is being mentored by Mary Jo Jerde, MBA, BSN, RN, FAAN, senior vice president of UnitedHealth Group, and is participating in three lead-

ership seminars and certificate programs. "More than anything, this has opened the door for exceptional networking as I consider future options," she said. "I would love to see if I could impact hospital systems in a leadership role, work in policy, and gain more insight on the healthcare sector so that someday I could try to help fix some of the problems. As my mother used to say, 'You have to know the rule book before you can fix the rules.'"

Building upon a legacy

The Jeannine Rivet National Leadership Fund supports nurses who will build upon the trailblazing contributions to healthcare and business of Jeannine Rivet, MPH, RN, FAAN, a retired executive vice president of the UnitedHealth Group. Andrea Brooks, DNP, CRNP, FNP-BC, was the inaugural recipient in 2019 of a Rivet Fellowship. The Rivet Fund provides a one-time \$10,000 fellowship to each of its 10 recipients over a decade.

"Awards like this are especially important for diversifying what nursing looks like—not just me as a Hispanic female in her 30s—but with my policy and business capabilities, and diversity of thought," Zegers said. "Philanthropy like this is how money turns into change because you invest in a unique cohort of future leaders who are committed to change. This is especially important given how the pandemic has exposed the inequities in healthcare."

— Jessica Stein Diamond is a journalist who specializes in healthcare, engineering, behavioral health, education, and equity topics.