



Difference Maker: You Can Do It: SIUE Grad Student, Frontline Healthcare Worker Inspires

by Megan Wieser

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EDWARDSVILLE – Single parent. Doctoral candidate. Frontline healthcare worker. Southern Illinois University Edwardsville graduate student Caitlin Phelan is a

multitasking, difference maker. Perhaps selfless is the best word to describe the woman who provides skilled, compassionate care to all with whom she interacts.

Phelan will earn a doctor of nursing practice degree from SIUE during the virtual commencement ceremonies that will go live at 1 p.m. Friday, Dec. 18 at siue.edu/virtual-commencement. Phelan will speak on behalf of her fellow graduates during the Graduate School ceremony.

In her speech, she plans to encourage individuals to hold tight to four simple words: “You can do it.” No matter how difficult the times get or how many responsibilities there are to juggle, a firm belief in oneself will keep you on course to achieving your goals, Phelan concludes.

“There will inevitably be more challenges ahead of all of us,” Phelan notes. “But, when we can find what sustains us and live with intention, we are better prepared for whatever life has in store. Whatever ‘it’ is, you can do it.”



This fall certainly brought added challenges for full-time healthcare professionals like Phelan. She is a nurse practitioner at a local veteran’s hospital. This week, she will begin aiding in the administration of COVID-19 vaccinations to healthcare workers at her facility, including herself.

“When the pandemic began, my role as an occupational health provider shifted toward the field of public health,” Phelan reflected, “with an emphasis on surveillance, testing, contact tracing and case management. I consider it an honor to be a part of this milestone in the fight against COVID-19.”

Among the biggest challenges brought forth by the pandemic has been witnessing its effects on healthcare workers, Phelan noted.

“From the beginning, many were torn between their sense of duty to care for their patients and the possibility that they might bring COVID-19 back home to their families,” Phelan explained. “Now, they are exhausted, frustrated and many are suffering from moral injury as a result of the things they are being asked to do each day. But, these nurses, doctors and other frontline workers continue to show up, day after day, to do what’s right for their patients. Truly, I have seen a dedication and courage from them like none other, and that is how I know we will win this fight.”

Phelan was a journalist before realizing that healthcare was the career for her. She completed a bachelor’s in nursing in 2006 and a master’s in the family nurse practitioner specialization in 2011, both from SIUE. With her doctorate, she intends to expand her positive impact on veterans care.

“One of the reasons why I love working with veterans is that they have a story to tell,” Phelan said. “It is truly living history to listen to veterans talk about everything they saw, their experiences and the places they’ve traveled. Unfortunately, they are sometimes misunderstood by healthcare professionals who have not had exposure to military culture.”

“Increasing awareness about the unique spiritual, mental and physical issues veterans face is important for improving clinical outcomes,” she added. “I hope that this degree will give me a platform to contribute to that process.”

With her passion for working with underserved communities and an abundance of academic and clinical experience, it’s clear Phelan is living true to her words. Whatever “it” is, she can do it.

“As a single parent, this journey has not been easy,” Phelan said. “I feel so much gratitude for the love and support from my family, friends and the School of Nursing. I give thanks to God for seeing me through this chapter of life and look forward to whatever the next one holds!”

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville provides students with a high quality, affordable education that prepares them for successful careers and lives of purpose to

shape a changing world. Built on the foundation of a broad-based liberal education, and enhanced by hands-on research and real-world experiences, the academic preparation SIUE students receive equips them to thrive in the global marketplace and make our communities better places to live. Situated on 2,660 acres of beautiful woodland atop the bluffs overlooking the natural beauty of the Mississippi River's rich bottomland and only a short drive from downtown St. Louis, the SIUE campus is home to a diverse student body of nearly 13,000.

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