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## Redbird Buzz Episode 31: Judy Neubrandner, August 15, 2023

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# Redbird Buzz

## Episode 31: Judy Neubrandner

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*August 15, 2023*

### **John Twork** 00:10

Welcome to Redbird Buzz. I'm John Twork from University Marketing and Communications. Our guest today is Dr. Judy Neubrandner, the dean of the Mennonite College of Nursing at Illinois State University. Dr. Neubrandner is a tenured nursing professional who has more than 20 years of academic experience, and during that time, she has garnered over \$7 million in federal funding to support the advancement of nursing education with a research focus on hospice palliative care, nursing education, and undergraduate student research.

### **John Twork** 00:54

And it's my pleasure to welcome Dr. Judy Neubrandner to Redbird Buzz. What's the word, Redbird? You've served as dean of the Mennonite College of Nursing for seven years, but for listeners who might not be familiar with you, tell us a little bit about yourself.

### **Judy Neubrandner** 01:08

Thank you, John, I would love to tell you about myself. I came here from Western Carolina University where I served for 19 years, the last five of those as the director of a school of nursing, and was excited to come back to the Midwest, where my roots are, originally from Missouri, and to come to the Mennonite College of Nursing kind of was a real great fit for me. Part of what they asked me when they interviewed me was, how would you feel about relating to alumni who had a Mennonite heritage? I don't have a Mennonite connection but I said I think that would be great. And it's been a really great fit for me, both to work with our alum from 50, sometimes 60 years ago, and to our current students who are more affiliated with Illinois State and a state school. So it's been a nice blend of our history with our current students.

### **John Twork** 02:12

I love to hear why people get involved in nursing. It truly is a calling to devote your career and your life to helping others. Why were you attracted to the nursing field?

### **Judy Neubrandner** 02:22

So initially I wanted to be a dentist as a young woman, but I broke my nose while I was in high school playing basketball and the nurses that cared for me while I had surgery were amazing and I kind of had this epiphany, I'm supposed to be a nurse, I want to be able to care for people the way they cared for me. Then later I had an opportunity to care for my grandfather who was dying and that kind of solidified it when I was 18 that I'm supposed to be a nurse.

**John Twork 02:52**

It seems like that story is so common where young people get interested in nursing because of personal really positive experiences with nurses. Does that - it seems like a reoccurring theme, at least in my experience.

**Judy Neubrandner 03:05**

Very much so. We have our students write essays upon admission and many times we hear they've had an experience, they've cared for a loved one, they personally have had interactions with nurses, and they realized this is something I want to do, I want to give back.

**John Twork 03:20**

You've been here as the dean of MCN for seven years. Tell us a little bit about, you know, this college has such a historied past, but even in those seven years it's really evolved and grown. How has it grown in these past seven years?

**Judy Neubrandner 03:35**

Well, so I was blessed to essentially come in and inherit a wonderful college with a great reputation, building on the shoulders of giants. So coming in and really realizing a quality program, so where do we go from here? And recognizing that our community, our region, our state, needs more nurses, we began to look and say, okay, is there a way that - we're at capacity, right, we're admitting as many students as we can based upon the space that we have, based upon the number of faculty, the number of clinical sites, how could we help our community have more nurses? And so we began exploring, we developed a strategic plan where we develop first partnerships in the region so that indeed, they could trust us, give us more clinical sites, then we work with our administration, and eventually you. We have a new simulation lab coming which will give us that ability to grow and other partnerships that are going to give us ability to grow and educate more nurses.

**John Twork 04:48**

You mentioned those partnerships and that leads to nurses being out and about in the community and I think for those listeners of ours who are community members, they probably have seen nursing students walking the halls of the various local hospitals with those MCN patches on their scrubs. Can you tell us what exactly are those students doing and what is the typical path of an undergraduate nursing student that would lead them to caring for some of our listeners in local hospitals?

**Judy Neubrandner 05:17**

Right. So we have what I really like as an admission process, we do holistic admissions where we don't look at a standardized test. We do look at their grade point average but we also have them write an essay because we really want to look at the full package of what this student is bringing, what is their volunteer, what is their calling, or why do they want to be a nurse? So we try to do this holistic admissions, and we admit them as freshmen so that they don't have to compete when they're going into their junior year, they're already admitted as a freshman nursing student. So their freshman and sophomore years, they're doing their gen ed to prepare them to make them a holistic student, and then in their junior year they begin their clinicals. And their clinicals can be anywhere within an hour to an hour and a half radius of Bloomington-Normal. They go to hospitals, they go to nursing homes, they go

to primary care settings, they go to elementary schools. Where are children that have diabetes or asthma? They go to school every day, right? So what a great place for our students to learn with a school nurse how to care for pediatrics. So they're all over the place, learning in all the facilities.

**John Twork 06:42**

And also faculty are all over as well. I know, you know, in the experience of my sons being born, they were cared for by Illinois State faculty. And so that's very unique to nursing where you have faculty practitioners, right?

**Judy Neubrandner 06:57**

That is exactly right. So our faculty, we love that they are providing nursing care while they're also teaching about nursing. And we partner with all the hospitals in the region and many of their full-time employees teach part-time for us, they take a clinical group of eight students on the unit where they work, you know, on an off time when they're not working, but then they're with our students and educating them on how to care for patients. So it's a wonderful partnership.

**John Twork 07:30**

You've mentioned that the program is growing and will continue to do so and some exciting new projects underway this summer. You know, as we were speaking before we started the podcast, you know it's a good summer, or at least a busy summer, when you have two ribbon-cuttings in the same summer. But two really exciting projects, I guess one ribbon-cutting, one groundbreaking - the groundbreaking was for the Mennonite College of Nursing Simulation Center expansion, and then there's a new program set to launch this fall in Springfield, that's what the ribbon cutting will be for in August. Let's talk about those two projects and let's start with the Nursing Simulation Center project. Tell us about kind of the history of that project up to where we are and where we're going with that project.

**Judy Neubrandner 08:18**

Right. So as I said before, we realized we had outgrown our current simulation lab. We had hospital beds set up in the hallways with cubicles in between so that our students could practice their skills. We just did not have the space to be able to accommodate our current, much less any growth. So worked closely with our administration to say, is there a way if we're able to grow that we could have more space? And we came up with a plan, presented it to our Board of Trustees, and they approved an \$18 million project where we're going to have 16,000 additional square feet, so a total of 26,000. So we currently have a 10,000 square foot simulation lab and we're going to build around it. It's going to be a beautiful facility, we're looking forward to it. That will allow us to educate an additional 400 students, understanding that that's four years, freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, each of those will have an additional 100 students, so graduating about 100 more students a year.

**John Twork 09:33**

That is a prime real estate too, right at the Bone Student Center entrance. When students visit Illinois State perhaps for the first time they're going to see that building that - it's huge to have that facility there, right?

**Judy Neubrandner 09:46**

Yes, we love the location. You look out the Bone Student Center if you're on the second or third floor and you'll be able to see our beautiful new building. Part of the building will be accessible to the public so they can come in and see the student engagement space, part of it will be a swipe badge because that's where our simulations will be happening, that intense learning where we want the students to be able to focus and concentrate because they're going to be taking care of patients or simulating taking care of patients, so there'll be less access there but we really want the community to see, you know, our beautiful new building.

**John Twork 10:25**

Can you talk a little bit about the technology in the building? I know that there already is high-tech technology, including VR, and that kind of thing and I assume that will only continue to grow with the expansion, correct?

**Judy Neubrandner 10:42**

That is exactly right, we are putting in two what they're calling "white boxes," and then our large 60-seat classroom will also have technology in it. And the white boxes are developed to have cameras so that you can essentially make a room anything you want. You can walk into a jungle where, you know, there are trees on all sides, and you're immersed in it, similar to VR only you won't have the glasses on, this is my understanding. And then in the bigger classroom we'll be able to do several different types of that type of technology where we can change it into a different experience. That classroom is also going to be where we can pull all the chairs and desks out and roll in hospital beds and actually have like a big hospital unit. So lots of versatility in that classroom also.

**John Twork 11:40**

How does that type of a situation really help prepare your nursing students for their clinicals when they actually go out into the hospitals?

**Judy Neubrandner 11:51**

We're looking at what is the future in healthcare and we know there's already a lot of technology out there, there's a lot of telehealth. A nurse is caring for a patient in an ICU room and can telehealth in a physician that's a thousand miles away and they work together to care for that patient. But also many times there's an opportunity to do - you talked about virtual reality, and you could have a patient that is having, experiencing something that maybe the student might not see very often, but we can repeatedly have that student have that experience and have the student learn from that how to respond quickly, how to identify what's going on, and research, you know, respond quickly if it's an aneurysm or something like that, or a stroke, and they can see the signs and symptoms and respond quickly. And we can repeat it and the student learns without that fear of that patient's really going to die in front of them.

**John Twork 13:00**

Sure, sure. Wow, exciting stuff. And set to launch next fall, right?

**Judy Neubrande** 13:04

Correct.

**John Twork** 13:06

So the groundbreaking happened in June and I assume we'll see some heavy machinery headed that way very soon, right?

**Judy Neubrande** 13:12

They're telling me the fences are going up this Friday, I think it's the 20th or something, so we'll lose part of a parking lot, but - and then they're gonna tear up that parking lot and start putting up our buildings, so it's exciting.

**John Twork** 13:28

Yeah, can't wait to see that. And another exciting project which will be opening this fall is the Springfield partnership. Tell us a little bit about the Springfield location. Why is MCN expanding to Springfield and what kind of program is being offered there?

**Judy Neubrande** 13:46

So Springfield came about just - I like to meet with the chief nursing officers in all of our region and just in conversations with Marsha Prater, who's the chief nursing officer at Memorial Health, talking about how can we work together, how can we help you, we just began to have conversations and she needs more nurses like every hospital does and we talked together about is there a way that we could work together and it kind of just culminated into, what if we brought Mennonite College of Nursing to Springfield and had a location down here? So we were game to explore and here we are. They've been able to build out a space for us, not quite 10,000 square feet at a location just three blocks from the hospital. Our partnership allows our students to do the majority of their clinicals in their five hospitals within the region so we call it an immersive experience. These students will know Memorial Health very well, right, and have great connections there. We've tried to recruit from that area, which makes sense that Memorial Health would want students who come from that area with the hope that they would stay and become employees someday of Memorial Health. It will be our exact same curriculum that we do here in the Normal location and faculty will be the same. We tried to find faculty that are in that location so they're not traveling, they will work closely with those students but they will be a part of our faculty the same as Normal. We say it's just a little bit further down the road but they are still the Mennonite College of Nursing and part of our family.

**John Twork** 15:41

And my understanding is enrollment is very strong for that program. The demand was there, right?

**Judy Neubrande** 15:46

Yes. So right now we have 41 students enrolled so we're very excited about that. We had about eight months to do a lot of recruiting and we have 41 students, we have our faculty on board, and we're ready to go. We're getting our t-shirts and all those things that we think about, the things that happen on a campus at the beginning of the semester, we're trying to replicate at a smaller scale in Springfield. We want them to feel like they are Illinois State because they are.

**John Twork 16:17**

What is, what does that mean for MCN to expand its footprint to Springfield where that is sort of a hotbed for healthcare in Illinois, right? I mean, what does that mean for MCN?

**Judy Neubrandner 16:28**

I think we're excited because we get to be a part of a very robust healthcare system, Memorial Health large has a burn center, medical school down there. We're excited, we hope to be - they are allowing us to use their simulation center for our simulation experiences, so that will give us an opportunity to do interprofessional education with medical students, with other students that are there. They have students from all kinds of nursing programs, physical therapy, occupational therapy, so we'll we will have an opportunity to engage with all those different professions in simulation. So for us it's something new too that we haven't had, so we're excited.

**John Twork 17:12**

Yeah, absolutely. And as if those two major projects weren't enough, there's other new and exciting things happening at MCN. What else would you like to share with our listening audience about other exciting things happening within the Mennonite College of Nursing?

**Judy Neubrandner 17:29**

I think I would like to talk about - it's not really new, we've been doing it for a while, but people may not understand it, or understand how it brings something special, it's our dedicated education experience. We started with Carle Bromenn doing that experience. So it partners a nursing student with a nurse, they work the same shift and they work with that same nurse for all their clinical experiences. So if you're the nurse and you're working on Thursdays, you know, from seven to three or seven to seven, that student goes with you and works alongside you and they get to know you and your unit. That's different from a typical clinical where a faculty member takes eight students to a unit and assigns those students across it and they have a different nurse every week, all those kinds of things. So what that builds is, that student has an affinity with that unit, with that hospital, because they come back to the same hospital for their four semesters and they work ideally with that same preceptor the whole time. And what the hospital finds is they retain a lot of those students who then want to come back and be employees. So we've been doing that with Carle Bromenn. Now OSF is starting a dedicated education experience also. It's small numbers we recognize, but we hope to grow it. So it's something special that I think gives the students - and not every student elects to do that because some want to try a lot of different hospitals - but we do find that those student outcomes, they have more confidence. I found that those students, by their second semester, sometimes they're carrying their preceptor's phone and they may take phone calls, they may call the pharmacy to talk about a medication or those kind of things, they may call the physician, which is a scary thing sometimes for a nursing student to do, but they've gained that confidence. So we find it a good experience for our students.

**John Twork 19:44**

Wow, very, very impressive. We hear headlines about the nationwide nursing shortage and you've mentioned that already in this interview and of course it was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. How bad is that shortage and what can MCN do to help combat that shortage?

**Judy Neubrandner 20:05**

I think it is significant. When I talk to the chief nursing officers they continue to tell me we need more nurses, Judy, let's work together, please continue to produce more nurses, so it is significant. We're trying to do our part with our strategic growth. So I think what I hear from our students, though, is, I think, you know, sometimes people say, what about the burnout and those kinds of things, and that is real, nurses definitely need to learn how to take care of themselves, but the students, our students, are enthusiastic. We have students that are ready to get out there and face the challenges of nursing and they want to be a part of making a difference in healthcare so they're excited about that. I'm jumping to your next question, I think, but I want to talk about how we're educating our students to care for themselves because I think that's important. We have instituted a program where students are, they learn meditation, yoga, we have a whole series where they learn how to eat right and focus on themselves and the health and wellbeing of themselves. In our new building, our new simulation lab, we have a health and wellness space. We're still trying to figure out what all we want to put in there. We definitely know we want to have a place where they can do some meditation or quiet, just a quiet space, a space for yoga, all those kinds of things. So we are definitely aware of the need for nurses to know how to self care because by nature we want to give back and care for others, we sometimes put ourselves last.

**John Twork 22:09**

Yeah, and I can only imagine, you know, it's a tough enough transition for a college student to maybe start working eight hours a day, five days a week, but, you know, nurses many times are working 12 hours and maybe overnights when they're starting up. It's just got to be an incredibly challenging transition that you have to prepare them for, right?

**Judy Neubrandner 22:30**

Correct, exactly. And talking to some recent graduates who came to a seminar to actually talk to our current students and give them some advice - and I liked that they are recent - and one of them said, you know, it's tempting, when you're fresh out and you're young and you have a lot of energy and you want to make money, your boss will come to you and say, can you work a double, so can you work 16 hours? But if you do a couple of those you're pretty tired and, you know, maybe you're not giving the same quality of care. So the advice they gave was really think about that and think, you know, yeah, the money would be nice but I need to take care of myself too. And I was really proud that they were giving that advice to these students who are getting ready to graduate.

**John Twork 23:21**

How valuable is your alumni network? You know, you keep pumping out these caregivers, these nurses that are making an impact all across the state and the country and how important is it for them to come back and talk to the future?

**Judy Neubrandner 23:37**

Yes, our alumni are wonderful and we have a Leadership Academy. We're going into our sixth year where we have taken students - we recognize that our students, because they come from Mennonite College of Nursing, and we have a great reputation, many times they're tapped to be in a leadership role early in their career. Maybe six months out, hey, can you lead this committee? Can you be over

this group of other nurses? And so the Leadership Academy provides them an opportunity to learn some of those skills, how to run a committee, how to maybe deal with some difficult conversations, those kinds of things. And then we bring back some of those alum to say, well, how is it now you're out? You've been out six months, yes, you were tapped to be a leader, and they say they were very prepared. Many - we talked to some that went through COVID like fresh out and they said yeah, it was hard, but at the same time we didn't know any different. Like, we hadn't been a nurse for five or ten years and so we just, we move forward. We did what we were taught and we cared for our patients. So I have a lot of hope for the future for nurses and nursing students, those fresh young ones that're coming out. They're enthusiastic and they want to make a difference.

**John Twork 25:03**

And you mentioned COVID, I have to ask, you know, your recruitment numbers have not decreased and yet, during the pandemic, it was sort of front and center how sort of burned out the nursing profession in general and healthcare in general was. You would think that that would adversely impact prospective students and yet, why are prospective students still interested in getting into nursing even though they kind of know what they're getting themselves into in your opinion?

**Judy Neubrandner 25:35**

Yeah, I think it goes back to where we started with, you know, kind of that calling. They had that experience, they say this is what I'm supposed to do, this feels right for me to go and care for others. They probably are a little better at having boundaries than my generation, which, you know, would probably work their fingers to the bone. They have better boundaries, which is healthy, right, and that's what we're encouraging them to care for themselves and understand they shouldn't work those double shifts all the time.

**John Twork 26:12**

Right. And for those prospective students who feel like they have a calling into the nursing profession, what is your pitch to them to come to Illinois State and join the Mennonite College of Nursing? How is MCN different from other programs?

**Judy Neubrandner 26:28**

I think one thing that I love is we have a success program. So we say if you get into our program, which you have to be, you have to have good grades and really be motivated - I said it's holistic, so it's not just about grades, but you really have to demonstrate to us that you want to be a nurse, that you've maybe volunteered, you're a nursing assistant, those kind of things, you have a passion for it. But if you get into the program, we're going to meet you halfway and do everything that we can to help you be successful. So we have a success program; that includes tutoring, mentoring, we have peer tutoring. So we really encourage students - you've been in class, you hear that lecture, and you're like, wow, I'm not getting it. So we have actually paid peer tutors who come alongside you and help you in whatever that course is. We also have faculty mentors and tutors who will help you along the way. So we're going to do everything. If you're putting your effort in, we're going to be there right alongside you to help you graduate. We - junior and senior year our retention rate is in the mid-90s, so freshmen and sophomore is in the mid-80s. So we still retain a lot in the freshmen and sophomores. Occasionally we have students that are like, nursing is just not for me once I got in there. It's not for me. So and then our pass

rates for our national licensure exam are very high also and we're very proud of that. We work hard, as I said, not only to prepare them to be a nurse, but to be successful on that exam also. So I think those are two things I would say to students.

**John Twork 28:12**

We've talked about the exciting things happening right now. Mennonite College of Nursing has a history of 104 years of nursing education excellence, and looking ahead to the next hundred years, you know, how do you as the current dean hope that this college continues to grow?

**Judy Neubrandner 28:31**

So I hope, I hope we always maintain that quality and, but I also would love for us to always be on the edge of technology, the cutting edge of research. We have a PhD program, I'm really looking for us to take nursing research and apply it to change healthcare. We're excited about our engineering program coming in and ways that nursing can partner with engineering to help healthcare in the future. It's a big part of the future, looking at technology that can make the lives of nurses easier. I think about ways that we can use technology to observe our patients and what's going on with them. We talk about all the wearables and those kinds of things, so what are the things of the future that nurses can connect with their patients and make sure they're monitoring their patients in a safe way, making the lives of the nurses easier, using technology so that we can get back to that caring. I have one of our faculty who just finished a certificate in massage therapy and she frequently wins the DAISY Award at her hospital, which is an award, you know, either by their colleagues or by patients saying they give great care. And she told me, she said, Judy, you know, I don't do anything really special except for many times I'll give my patient a back massage because, you know, they're stressed or they have pain. And she said, I'm not doing anything special, but those are the kinds of things, that caring that is beyond the technical of nursing that we need to get back to.

**John Twork 30:25**

Yeah, so a combination of the personal, hands-on, and technology perhaps to assist, huh?

**Judy Neubrandner 30:32**

Right, exactly. That would be my dream that technology gives nursing more time to do some of those caring things.

**John Twork 30:39**

Yeah, yeah. Well, it's an exciting future ahead and here in the near term we're very much looking forward to the Springfield ribbon-cutting and then also watching the multimillion-dollar expansion for the simulation center starting up here very shortly and looking forward to that opening next fall. So thank you, Dr. Neubrandner so much for your time today.

**Judy Neubrandner 31:00**

Thank you. I appreciate it.

**John Twork 31:08**

That was Dr. Judy Neubrandner, the dean of the Mennonite College of Nursing at Illinois State. For more information about MCN visit [Nursing.IllinoisState.edu](http://Nursing.IllinoisState.edu). Thanks for listening to Redbird Buzz and be sure to tune in next time for more stories from beyond the quad.