

It Takes a Village to Write a Dissertation

BY DANIEL CHAMPAGNE

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Terry Deshefy-Longhi uses a digital video camera to assess communication problems of couples living with Parkinson's Disease as part of her doctoral dissertation.

In the acknowledgments section of her doctoral dissertation, Terry Deshefy-Longhi '09, wrote “To paraphrase an often-used quote, it takes a village to write a doctoral dissertation.” And she couldn't be more thankful that so many people at Yale University School of Nursing have helped make up a large part of that village.

“When I look back and see what I was like then and now, it is a transformation,” she said. “YSN has enabled me to see myself as an independent researcher, and the faculty have helped me acquire the necessary skills to be one. Most importantly, they taught me how to get those skills,” she said. “They taught me how to find the resources that I need as a researcher of families dealing with chronic illness.”

Deshefy-Longhi's dissertation, titled, “Nonverbal Communication Accuracy in Couples Living with Parkinson Disease,” focuses on determining “how accurately partners of people with Parkinson (PWPs) can assess specific emotional intentions from the nonverbal cues of their PD mates, when the verbal content of the PWPs' messages is controlled.”

She chose YSN to pursue her doctorate in part because it afforded her the opportunity to do research in her chosen field of family health and chronic illness.

When she arrived at YSN, she was paired with Dr. Kathy Knafel as her dissertation advisor. But when Knafel left for a position at the Oregon Health and Science University, Deshefy-

Longhi thought she might have to leave YSN to find appropriate faculty for her dissertation. That's when she truly discovered the diversity of the faculty.

“Kathy actually stayed on as a reader, but I thought I would have to leave and go to another school to find the faculty that could help me. The beauty of Yale University School of Nursing, I discovered, is that the faculty are diverse in their interests as well as experts in their fields, so I was able to get the guidance I needed right here.”

She was paired with a new advisor, Jane Dixon, and sought additional help from other Yale University departments. She found a psychology professor, Dr. Marianne LaFrance, to help her understand the communications aspect of her research.

Deshefy-Longhi also said that being at YSN gave her the confidence to reach out to other researchers in a way she would never have done on her own. She has been in communication with researchers in her field in Australia, the United Kingdom, and across the United States.

“The faculty at YSN has always treated me like a ‘colleague-in-the-making’ and that makes all of the difference,” she said. “They are saying ‘we are right here beside you, and we're walking with you on this journey.’ That's the kind of support I received from the faculty, administration, and technical staff at YSN, and it is difficult to find the words to say ‘thank you’ to everyone involved.”