Remembering Susie Nanney

It is not easy to summarize the impact Marilyn “Susie” Nanney, PhD, MPH, had on our department. Throughout her ten years here, her dedication to her work and to her colleagues created a legacy that has touched nearly everyone affiliated with the department.

Throughout her career, Dr. Nanney’s academic work focused on addressing health policy and equity issues. Described as a “pioneer in nutritional health research” by former Department Head Mac Baird, MD, MS, Dr. Nanney dedicated her life’s work to creating healthy lifestyles, particularly in children, through research, education, community partnerships, and legislative work.

In 2016-17, she was a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health Policy Fellow for Senator Amy Klobuchar, where she worked hands-on with representatives in Washington, DC, to promote evidence-based practice through legislation. She was selected not only for her professional achievements but for her potential to contribute to long-term systemic change. As a natural leader, Dr. Nanney had a strategic mind that enabled her to identify problems, particularly those that impacted communities of high need, and bring the right resources and people to the table to solve those problems.

Kolawole S. Okuyemi, MD, MPH, a former colleague, now at the University of Utah, calls Dr. Nanney “one of the foundational leaders in our program and a very inspirational mentor to many students and faculty (including me). She cared deeply about her research making meaningful impact on the lives of the communities she works with."

Described as a “connector” by colleagues, Dr. Nanney placed collaboration at the center of her work. A rare combination of accomplished scientist and natural community builder, she formed innovative partnerships with food banks and schools, and participated in community collaborative research. As the director of the Health Equity in Policy Initiative (HEPI), a component of the Program in Health Disparities Research (PHDR), she bridged information gaps between researchers, communities, and policy-making bodies. Her role on the Minnesota Department of Human Services Cultural and Ethnic Communities Leadership Council provided a platform for her work in reducing racial and ethnic disparities in state programming. Dr. Nanney was the co-director (with Jerica Berge, PhD, MPH) of the Healthy Eating and
Activity Across the Lifespan (HEAL) Center. This center facilitated integration across research, clinical practice, community resources, and policy domains to promote human health in Minnesota and beyond. At the Department of Family Medicine, where she was both an esteemed colleague and dear friend to many, her work and mentoring of junior investigators as well as senior investigators will not be forgotten. She also touched the lives of many colleagues in UMN extension, the School of Public Health, and other departments through collaborations on research projects and policy initiatives.

“She saw so much potential to do good work in the world,” says Caitlin Caspi, ScD. “She wanted to make the work better and more relevant to the people it would affect – in a rare, authentic way that is not the way we’re trained.”

Dr. Nanney’s drive to improve the lives of others was not just limited to her health policy work. She was a positive force within the lives of her colleagues, who describe her as a person who made sure everyone in the room felt heard. “She gave her all to her work, but somehow she also gave 100% to her coworkers,” says Dr. Berge. “She was always running a marathon, or attending someone’s wedding, or finding grant opportunities for others. She was genuinely excited when good things happened to you.” Dr. Nanney and her husband Steve even showed up at the naturalization ceremony for Dr. Caspi’s husband, videotaping the event and taking the couple out to dinner to celebrate afterwards.

Her optimism and generosity set a powerful example for others. “She was someone who would never let problems derail important work,” says Michele Allen, MD, MS. “She had this incredible ability to reframe problems and come up with ideas for a path forward. She was always certain that a solution could be found. And she helped the rest of us get there, too.”

“She had a leader’s mind and creative ideas that set an example for other women in academia,” says Dr. Berge.

Dr. Nanney’s widespread influence throughout academic, community, and health systems has left those communities struggling with how to grapple with the loss of such a powerful and beloved colleague. But as her life brought together so many people in support of doing good work, so has her death.

“I’m profoundly saddened by the world’s loss,” says Dr. Baird. “We cannot replace Dr. Nanney, nor her husband Steve, but we will dedicate ourselves to fulfilling their combined mission of making the world a little better every day.”