



Interview: Jean Aertker DNP, ARNP, FNP-BC, FAANP

Date: October 27, 2024

Interviewers Name: Michaelene P Jansen

Place for Interview: Phone Interview

Education:

DNP Case Western Reserve University

January, 2006 to May, 2008

MS University of South Florida

September, 1982 to December, 1984

BSN University of South Florida

September, 1978 to May, 1980

ADN Cumberland College, New Jersey

1972-1974

Certifications:

FNP-BC, American Nurses Credentialing Center

Short Bio:

Dr. Jean Aertker (nee: Henderson) has practiced as a NP since 1984 and created three unique models of NP practice by becoming the first NP in an integrated joint university faculty practice at USF College of Nursing in Tampa; later developed four satellite NP managed hospital-based occupational health clinics; and owned a thriving occupational health practice in Tampa, Florida, for over twenty-three years. Her clinical expertise is in worker health and safety, workers compensation, worker fitness for duty exams, FMCSA commercial driver examiner training, drug free workplace substance testing programs and fitness for duty examinations. Dr. Aertker disseminates her expertise nationally on occupational health topics as well as business ownership and health care advocacy.

Dr. Aertker was one of the first twenty charter members of AANP in 1985, received the AANP Florida State Award for Excellence in 1992, served three terms as AANP Region 11 director, served on the AANP Executive Board as the Region 11 Director from 2013

to 2019 and appointed as the board liaison to FAANP from 2016-2019. Her many contributions to AANP leadership include two terms as AANP state representative, past chair of the Fellows of AANP (FAANP) Selection Committee and FAANP History Committee charter member. It was during her tenure on the AANP board that the new AANP office building was started. She was selected as the first co-chair of the AANP Occupational-Environmental Health Community in April 2019 and continues to serve this community.

Dr. Aertker was a founding member and legislative vice president of the Florida Nurse Practitioner Network (FNPN) in 2002 creating Florida's first state NP organization. In 2004, Jean led the passage of four NP signature bills for the removal of barriers directly impacting her practice in Florida. After years of advocacy, the FNPN members honored her by creating the Dr. Aertker Health Policy Scholarship Award. She was selected as the first FNPN Executive Director since 2018 and continues to advocate for full practice authority for all Florida NPs.

Dr. Aertker has worked tirelessly to advance the NP role especially inspired after attending her first national NP conference in Keystone, CO in 1984 where upon she met Dr. Loretta Ford. Years later, she developed a close friendship with Dr. Ford who retired to Florida in the late 1990's. In the Spring of 2014, Jean organized NP volunteers to build a 30-foot access ramp for Ford's home. It was because of that effort that Dr Ford named us her "NP Force". Later, as Dr. Ford was nearing her centennial year, Dr. Aertker gathered fellow Florida NPs to celebrate Loretta Ford birthdays that started with the Inaugural 98th Birthday Dr. Loretta C. Ford Golf Tournament to raise funds for her NP Charities, arranged a golf cart parade during the COVID-19 pandemic in honor of Dr. Ford's 100th birthday and the Year of the Woman Centennial, and subsequent birthday parties since. In May 2023, Jean and Florida NP Force team held a Victorian themed "Tea for Lee" at the historic University of Tampa ballroom with over two-hundred NPs from around the country gathered to honor Dr. Ford. In 2023, Jean arranged with the Department of Veteran's Administration Nursing Office to secure a Presidential Invitation for Dr. Ford to attend the 2023 Veterans Day White House breakfast and wreath-laying ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery as an honored guest with President Biden presiding. Several NPs from the DC area gathered to share that special day.

When did you become an NP? What was the motivation?

When I entered the Air Force Nurse Corp in 1974, I requested on my recruiting "dream location sheet" a warm weather base in the south. I joined the military right as I turned twenty-one and my goal was to be a flight nurse. I was assigned to England Air Force Base, Alexandria, Louisiana after medical officer orientation training in Texas. I lived in the BOQ with three other officers including Major Zulema Kenney who was a pediatric nurse practitioner. She was the first NP I had ever met! I became very interested in her expanded role as the nurse officer and knew that's what I wanted to do. At that time, only Physician Assistants were working in the base Primary Care Clinics. The two NPs on base were assigned to pediatrics or gynecology clinics. At England AFB, I met my future husband Captain Alan Aertker, a Texas Aggie who also aspired to fly. He was

initially assigned as the base auditor but later sent to flight school as a navigator. We planned our wedding in the next year so we could join at his next assignment. We married the next year with his new assignment was overseas and we planned instead to start a family overseas. Our daughter Katie arrived in August of 1977, just two weeks to the day before Alan was killed in a plane crash in a field in the small village of Thuine, Germany. I did not know the name of the village until twenty years later. All that was reported in the aircraft accident reports I received the following year the official USAF report they crashed near Hopsten German Air Force Base. Details from the crash investigation and autopsy reports, presumed that front seat pilot Captain Ken Seidler, was presumed dead or incapacitated based on his autopsy finding a 90% occlusion in the left main coronary artery. However, the quick thinking, action and bravery of my husband, witnesses reported the plane turned upward at the last minute avoiding the village and crashed inverted in an open field with both crewmen lost. Ironically, Ken was also from south New Jersey and we both shared the same pediatrician, and my mother knew his family. The villagers of Thuine have never forgotten how their small village was saved by the plane veering off as it was directly headed towards the village hospital, the catholic school, convent and St. George's Catholic Church. As a new young mother and sudden widow with an infant daughter to raise, I left our base in Alconbury England, returned to the states and eventually relocated to Tampa Florida. Through all this my mother was my greatest supporter to encourage me to return to school and obtain my advanced degrees to become a NP. I chose to move to Tampa to attend the University of South Florida and became an adult nurse practitioner. In those early years, I worked three jobs as and RN and NP to learn the role. NP jobs were rare and few to be found. We had to carve out our niche even though the role was twenty years in the making by then. I was able find an orthopedic surgeon who was willing to teach me this specialty which spurred my interest in urgent care and occupational health. After a couple years, I was hired to work at the USF College of Nursing assigned a NP clinician and teaching position at a free clinic to teach medical students. Soon after starting that role, I was able to bring NP students there to train alongside the medical students. It was great opportunity for all students and faculty there. My mentors/advisors at the College of Nursing, Dr. Imogene King and Dr. Joan Gregory, were adamant that students be active members of the ANA, which I was. I joined FNA and found myself volunteering in my district and state groups and valued the comradery.

What experiences did you bring into the role?

After graduating from nursing school in 1973, I worked in a small 100 bed rural hospital in south, New Jersey. It was a great place to learn needed skills by working of course the night shift as most new grads did. A family friend and retired Army Air Corps WWII Officer convinced me to join the military as wanted to travel. I completed my application and was one a few nurses with a two-year degree in nursing that entered the USAF during the Vietnam-era. I thought for sure that I would be sent to Vietnam, but by this time the military were downsizing operations. I went from basic OBMTM training in Texas to Alexandria Louisiana, a beautiful base with a small base hospital. A year after arriving there, our medical team was assigned to Operation New Horizon in May of 1975 and sent to set up a field hospital near Eglin AFB, FL. USAF and UPSHSC medical teams processed over 10,000 Vietnamese refugees coming to America. We all

learned so much from that experience. Initially, we tried to incorporate the American diet and habits, but the American diet made most ill. It did not take us long to realize that we needed to adapt their routines, culture and diet (fish and rice). I saw new illnesses and intestinal parasites I had never known before and learned herbal therapies they brought with them. Mothers delivered without medical assistance, and we treated many cases of TB and various infections. Following that assignment, I received a slot to nursing Flight School in Texas in late 1975 and returned to my home base in Louisiana. In 1976 we married and followed by husband to his next duty station in Alconbury England. Later, after leaving the military and becoming a NP, I attended two Keystone NP conferences early on and met Dr. Ford in 1984. I remember thinking she was amazing and so positive, not knowing at that time what a good friend she would later become. The Keystone conferences were a huge expense at that time for a working single mother, but these early gatherings secured many long-time NP friends. I remember attending an NPACE conference in Orlando in the fall 1984 where a group gathered to discuss starting a national organization for nurse practitioners. I wrote a check with 20 others, we became the first members of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners. The rest is history and such an amazing effort of dedication and passion by the early NPs I learned from. As my interest in occupational health expanded, I started and became director of four NP run clinics at Tampa General Hospital. The clinics had NPs to manage staff and care for patients and serve as preceptors for students. The University of South Florida Public Health School stated an occupational health specialty program, so I took additional classes and became certified as a COHN-S. The hospital eventually sold the clinics, and I jumped at the opportunity to open my own occupational health practice, Tampa Occupational Health Services. It was a woman owned, veteran certified business and sold it 23 years later, just as Covid struck America. For the past 35 years, I have volunteered at the Judeo-Christian Health Clinic serving the medically indigent in Tampa and have served on the board of directors for over 10 years. I say I failed retirement and continue to work part-time at the Moffitt Team Medical Center. I feel that it is important for NPs stay connected and give back to your community Did you experience any challenges? How were they resolved? The greatest challenge upon becoming a NP was in finding a job and continuing to develop the my new role. NPs were just getting strongly organized, there were not that many in my community by then and experienced colleagues were willing to help. But like many in the early years, we found ways to create NP positions as we watched the more progressive states move forward. I eventually landed a clinical teaching NP position and created a model for NPs to train in a multidisciplinary teaching clinical while serving the medically underserved. It was the perfect position for me and offered me the opportunity to get involved in advocating for NPs at the state and national level. I was a founding member and legislative vice president for Florida NP Network in 2002, and I still serve as the Executive Director. The early challenges were to educate the public and remove practice barriers. Florida was the last state to allow prescriptive authority for controlled substances in 2017, and we still have much more to achieve full practice authority here. Uniting the state has brought us success and by 2000, just before the Covid pandemic, we were able to pass autonomous practice for primary care NPs in Florida. My hope is one day soon, we too will be green on the practice map allowing NPs to practice as the other full practice authority states! Are there any experiences that you would like to talk

about? My mother was an important factor in my life. She was a Vice President of Salem Community College in New Jersey and strongly encouraged all to furthering your education. She was the first woman in administration to hold a senior position in a community college in New Jersey. After she retired, she was my rock to help me as a young mom and widow as we moved to Florida. Through my nursing network she connected with the local private university that started their first RN-BSN program in 1982. Later, I funded a scholarship for a RN-BSN student at the University of Tampa in honor of my mother, Margaret Henderson who continued to volunteer on their board. I moved on with life as a busy single mother after the crash and was very surprised to receive a letter in early 1998 from USAF Colonel Kozik at NATO, that the people of Thuine had erected and dedicated a monument for my husband for saving their village on the 20th anniversary. The memorial is a monolithic stone monument framed between two oak trees that stands to remind the villagers of the two airmen who sacrificed their lives for them. I was informed that there was a path from the convent to the crash site and the Sisters from the Motherhouse in Thuine, St. Francis of the Martyr St. George in Thuine walked daily to the site for prayers. That next August 25th, 1998 our family attended a re-dedication ceremony. There I was told the farmers in the field witnessed the crash and saw a MIG plane in the area. This was never in the official accident report. It gave me pause to think of that. The small village had no hotels, so all stayed overnight with local families. My twin, Jane and I were guests of the Sisters and stayed in the beautiful convent! I have visited the village several times since. In June 2025, I will travel with my grandchildren on our heritage tour of Ireland, Scotland, and Germany so that they can visit the memorial and meet the Aertker families that live about thirty miles from the village of Thuine. It's a small world indeed.

Another important part of my life is my friendship with Dr. Loretta Ford. Lee and her husband Bill moved to Florida after retirement. The Florida Nurses Association invited Lee to speak at an ARNP event we held in Clearwater as I served as chair of the APRN Task Force. She still wooed the crowd! Later in 2010, contacted Dr. Ford and asked to pop up and visit her- to bring a proper English Tea luncheon. She agreed and said certainly, but bring extra for Bill too! I enjoyed my visit with Lee and Bill, whom she called her Nobleman, and visited periodically as they lived close to me in Florida. One day, their daughter mentioned to me that they needed a ramp at their home and asked could I help. My brother-in-law was a carpenter in his early years, so he designed and brought the materials for the ramp. He gathered a group to assemble the ramp. I put out a call to NPs in the area to help with this project and while the ramp was being build, many of us tidied up the yard and garden. Lee call the group, the NP Force and it stuck. We returned yearly to help with tasks that need to be done. Since 2014, we have held birthday parties and enjoyed playing golf. Although she was a World War II veteran, she was not eligible for VA care after she retired due to new guidelines. Ironically, she introduced NPs into the VA system as a new provider role that has expanded quickly. The Cleland-Dole Act of Dec 2022 allowed her to enroll in the VA for health care when she turned 103 years old. In 2023, her daughter and I traveled to DC with her so she could attend the Veterans Day breakfast escorted by the chief nurse of the VA Dr. Chris Salso to meet the President and afterwards travel to Arlington Cemetery for the annual

wreath laying ceremony with President Biden. I continue to help her family watch over her as she turns 104 years old this December 28, 2024.

What was most challenging in your career/ most important?

Starting my own practice was a dream and I was confident by that time to give it a go. I knew I could still make it a success by starting an occupational health practice in a state that required supervisory protocols for NP practice. I had the experience from the clinical side, but it was learning the business aspects of running a business that was a challenge. I quickly learned about business licenses, insurance, making payroll, submitting proposals to win medical provider contracts, writing policies and procedures, learning how to network with companies to capture new business and learn how to market the practice as a woman-veteran owned entity competing with other medical providers. I would say that Nurse Practitioners are well suited to take every opportunity to build a successful NP business, but it takes a supportive family and colleagues, adequate funding, detailed planning, and confidence in yourself to make it work. It was the best job I ever had! I ran this business for twenty-three years and retired just before the covid pandemic, which I felt was providential.

Is there anything you would want to change?

I wish I had taken the time to get my PhD in nursing. The opportunities for NPs with the PHD are endless. This I feel is going to make the nursing profession stand stronger as research helps us make needed changes and add stronger validity for our expanded nursing roles. We have to keep up. I am very satisfied with my DNP education from Case Western Reserve University and I like the clinical focus it provided to make me a better NP. I have been very fortunate in practice and business and feel the doctorate level has improved the NP role. I am eager to see how the NP role expands to serve us in the future Space Force – our next frontier.

What do you see as pivotal moments in the past years?

Pivotal moments were my USAF nursing service that provided me lifetime veteran status and many networking opportunities. The tragic loss of my husband killed in a plane crash, and being a young widow with an infant daughter to raise forced me to quickly redirect my life. The great support from my family, especially my mother, helped me achieve my NP degree ten years after I joined the USAF. Family is my inner strength for helping me build all in my career.

practitioners to find a mentor early on in their career. You may be lucky to have many as I did at different stages of my career. I learned from them all. Students should also seek the “best” school; they need to know our NP history and how to be a servant leader. I would also encourage new practitioners to challenge themselves and to promote the nursing profession and the NP role proudly. Hold dear our professional nursing roots. Also, find opportunities to volunteer in the community is very important. I worry that nurse practitioners are not engaged in their state or national nurse practitioner organizations, you need to have a strong network. You need these roots. Many of the hard-fought legislative battles won can be in jeopardy of being rescinded unless we stand united to defend and grow. I would also caution NPs to monitor the social media,

be the professional so messages are not misinterpreted by others to use against nurse practitioners and that responsibility is inherent in being a NP.

What do you see as the role of Nurse Practitioners in the next 25 years?

The NP role will continue to see growth driven not only by our aging population but challenged by how the younger generation will seek and obtain future health care. Many NPs now blend AI into their practice decision making, but I hope NPs maintain our close nurse-patient relationships that keep us as the most trusted profession.

Remember, Dr. Ford's quote, "Your profession is nursing, and your role is Nurse Practitioner." We will have to try to think through and how to bring in new changes to speed up or change the status quo while keeping the NP role solid. I certainly hope healthcare decisions are not just a one directional algorithm-healthcare work is not always an absolute. NP knowledge and experience are critical, and that comes from reading, asking tough questions and staying current. The electronic health records systems are a love-hate relationship for me. I wish all were uniform and easy to use, ensuring a future where all providers have more time to spend interacting and less time typing!