

# Faculty of Health

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### Dal Flashback with Debra A. Barrath

#### What is your greatest memory of your time at Dal?

"The mentorship provided by my nursing professors, Drs. Jean Hughes and Gail Tomblin Murphy. Because of their influence, I have made a small difference globally and in the lives of individuals and communities.

We shared many enduring conversations that influence me to this day. Perhaps the most powerful, was one where Jeannie helped me to expand my mindset. During one of our thesis advisory meetings, she encouraged me to think beyond the limitations of that young Coloured girl from South Africa and to reach towards my full potential.

For all that I had dreams and ambition, she saw more and believed in me more than I did. She touched something special inside me that day. I have never forgotten that influence and hope that I get to transform others' lives as she once did for me."

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### Alumni Outside the Box: Debra A. Barrath

Posted by Kathy MacFarlane on September 30, 2019 in [Alumni & Friends](#)



Debra A. Barrath (Submitted photo)

**Debra A. Barrath (MN 2000)** grew up in a multiracial neighborhood in Durban, South Africa. Since the age of 12 she's had a five-year plan and was willing to make big changes and move great distances to realize those goals. At 21 she was accepted by Dalhousie for her Masters' Degree thanks to scholarship funding through the Southern African Student Education Program (SASEP) so she has always felt that Dalhousie chose her! "I've always been a dreamer and an adventurer. I'm driven to make a contribution that matters. For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to work to make a difference in healthcare globally," she says. At Dalhousie she found mentors that modeled the way and gave her the tools to make that a reality.

After leaving Dal, she worked for NS Capital Health, the University of Toronto, and the Nova Scotia Department of Health. She then left NS to pursue a PhD in California, but knew within a few months that she had made a mistake, and returned to Canada and spent four years as a director with Alberta Health Services. Four years later, she married an American and moved to Los Angeles. It was not an easy transition and she found it difficult to find healthcare work that was a good fit with her Canadian experience.

She was encouraged by the president of the International Coach Federation to build on her leadership experience in Canada and pursue a career as an executive coach. She accepted his challenge and has been practicing as an executive coach to healthcare leaders since 2014, initially through her own business [Barrath Consulting](#) and now for Kaiser Permanente in Southern California.

"Healthcare is part of the fibre of my being and I've always loved leadership development, so it made sense to build a career that married the two," she says. Her graduate education in psychiatric-mental health nursing and nursing communication, and years of experience as a healthcare leader in Canada has equipped her to support the growth and development of new and existing leaders.

As an executive coach Debra works with healthcare leaders who want a thought partner for important decisions, or to develop the leadership and communication skills to improve their performance and the health of the people they serve. "I get to work with individuals and teams, in boardrooms and at the bedside. What I love most is working with people who are committed to changing their lives, because they are open and insightful during coaching sessions and are intentional about implementing their action plans and achieving their goals between sessions. Every time a

client tells me that they achieved an extraordinary goal, I realize what is possible when we are intentional about achieving what is important to us. Dreams can become reality. "

As an external coach, her business allows her to provide executive coaching to clients who work with healthcare nonprofits and think tanks in Canada and the US. As an internal coach, her work for Kaiser Permanente is directed at creating a culture of coaching and kindness (official title is Director of Service Excellence or Care Experience). Debra says, "I have the extraordinary privilege of spending all my time creating a culture in which leaders and their employees can provide warmth, respect and compassion to our patients and each other – through coaching, training, relationship building, and program development."

When asked what words of advice she would give to students in health professions, Debra offers:

- Join a team of people who are committed to something bigger and making a real difference that improves others' lives.
- Create good peer relationships while you're at school and they will last a lifetime.
- Identify a mentor (or two) who believes in you, inspires you, and sponsors you.
- Create a vision that pulls you towards excellence, that excites and motivates you for years to come.

"I've been described as an iconoclast. That hasn't always served me well. But I've learned to ask tough questions with gentleness, to listen, to form authentic, meaningful relationships, and to generate a vision that leaves me and others touched, moved, and inspired to respond to important human needs -- all these things have helped me to create a relevant, meaningful, and rewarding life."

Debra is enjoying the excitement of being part of a massive health system in Los Angeles undergoing constant change. She is on the cutting edge of a health system that's making a difference in communities and the lives of individuals. "It's fun to work with an organization that invites me to lead culture change, to wrestle with challenging situations, and to create innovations that transform human experience for our patients and employees through good communication and leadership." Someday she does plan on returning to Nova Scotia and creating a peaceful life – that's more about cultivating peace of mind than an absence of adventure.

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