

Alma Author, Former Nurse to Host Book Event

**William Meiners
Herald Correspondent**

Bullies make daily news in fields ranging from business to politics, school to sports. Although you might not expect that intimidating behavior in a profession like nursing, known for empathy and caregiving. JoNeil Conley, a former Alma nurse and doctoral researcher, knows better. She's lived through bullying, studied its mental and physical effects, and recently wrote a book all about it.

On Tuesday, May 12, during Nursing Week and on Florence Nightingale's birthday no less, Conley will launch that new book, *The Biology of Bullying: Why Nurses Eat Each Other and How to Take Them Off the Menu*, in a celebration at Breckenridge United Methodist Church at 6 p.m. The event is free and open to the public.

Conley spoke with The Herald on Friday about how an early bullying experience by a fellow nurse not only shaped her career but led her on a mission to do something about it. A graduate of the Hurley School of Nursing 50 years ago, Conley said one instructor "looked at all of our bright-eyed faces and said, 'nurses eat their young.' And if you were to ask a nurse today, they would say they got the same message from their nursing instructors. But what's happened is we eat our young, our old, and anybody in between."

A seminal bullying experience, for Conley, then just 26 years old, happened when a preceptor, or training nurse, sent her out

of an operating room on what turned out to be a "snipe hunt" of sorts for a particular retractor tool that was nowhere to be found. When Conley returned to the OR nearly 20 minutes later empty-handed, the preceptor told the surgeon, "Don't worry, she doesn't know what she's doing."

Conley said she maintained her professionalism in the moment, even though she may have felt like screaming or crying. Soon after the embarrassment, however, she learned the preceptor had sent the exact retractor out for repair the day before. Whether the older nurse was territorial or vindictive, Conley could not know for sure. Yet her own physical and mental response to all of it can make that wound feel as fresh as yesterday.

Throughout her career, Conley said she developed enough confidence in herself to not allow bullies into her headspace. As she moved into leadership roles, however, she likened herself to a "Mama bear" to discourage such bad behavior in the workplace.

The one-time director of the emergency department and operating room at MyMichigan Alma, Conley also became a voice of change. As the senior director of the Nursing Leadership Academy at the Advisory Board Company, she worked with more than 300 hospitals across the country.

Drawing on personal and professional experiences, Conley explored the physical effects of bullying in what would become her doctoral thesis 14 years ago. With a

nurse as her dissertation chair, she put out a survey to working nurses, asking about their experiences with bullying. "Within 72 hours, I had 1,500 responses," she said. "That hit a nerve."

Bullying can hit a literal nerve. Specifically, the vagus nerve, the longest in the human body. Certain stressors can automatically cause a "fight or flight" response. "All this happens to your nervous system when you get bullied," Conley said.

The potential high stress of a hospital setting, sometimes dealing with life and death situations, can only compound problems that stem from bullying. Conley also points to nurses leaving the field in droves, even before the pandemic, and how the worst-case scenarios could lead to a collapse of the healthcare system.

"Nurses suffer from compassion fatigue, burnout, and moral injuries," said Conley. "Bullying can be that tipping point."

In exploring the biology of bullying and devising strategies to combat it, Conley also founded the Bullyologist practice. The truth is, she said, most everyone is capable of being both bullied and a bully. She insists the book is to help nurses and others manage those stressful moments and process them better afterwards.

Conley's career is a dedication to healthcare and nursing in particular. How appropriate then that her book launch, alongside the posthumous birthday celebration of history's most famous nurse, offers something healing for the profession. Additionally, a



JoNeil Conley, former director of the emergency department and operating room at MyMichigan Alma, will celebrate the release of her new book *The Biology of Bullying: Why Nurses Eat Each Other and How to Take Them Off the Menu*. In an event that's free and open to the public, Conley will hold court at Breckenridge United Methodist Church at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, May 12.

portion of proceeds from book sales will go to funding for the Nightingale Tribute, a funeral ceremony recognizing the commitments of registered nurses.

EightCAP Honors First LACY Award Recipient



Carrie Tovar, EightCAP's mental health coordinator, was named the first recipient of the agency's new LACY Recognition Award. The award honors employees who reflect the legacy of longtime EightCAP staff member Jan Lacy and the values of Community Action.

**Megan Neeley
Herald Correspondent**

EightCAP, Inc. has named Carrie Tovar as the first recipient of its new LACY Recognition Award, honoring employees who exemplify the spirit of Community Action and the legacy of longtime staff member Jan Lacy.

Tovar, who serves as EightCAP's mental health coordinator, was recognized for her compassion, leadership and commitment to empowering children, families and colleagues across the agency's service area in Gratiot, Ionia, Isabella and Montcalm counties.

The award was created to celebrate employees who go above and beyond in demonstrating such values—values officials said were embodied by Lacy during her nearly five decades with the organization.

Lacy began her career with EightCAP in 1974 and dedicated 49 years of service to the agency. During that time, she helped guide the organization's growth, supported new initiatives and maintained a strong focus on accountability and compliance.

For Tovar, the recognition reflects a career built on relationships. "Being named the first recipient of the LACY Recognition Award

means that I am reaching the goals I set for myself," she said.

Tovar noted she has long measured success not by titles or accolades, but by the connections she builds with others.

"About 24 years ago, I decided to measure my successes by connecting with others," she explained. "By helping to put the light in a person's eyes when they feel seen; To create an atmosphere where people feel safe enough to learn more about what interests them; By remaining non-judgmental so people can have a space to hear themselves and be heard."

Tovar's passion for Head Start began while attending Central Michigan University, when a classroom experience inspired her to pursue work supporting children and families. She said seeing children "filling their bellies and their hearts" confirmed her desire to serve through an agency centered on connection and meeting people where they are.

As mental health coordinator, Tovar supports EightCAP's Head Start and Early Head Start programs, which provide early childhood education, health services and family support for children from birth to age 5 in income-eligible families. The programs are designed to prepare children for

school while helping parents maintain employment and build stability.

In addition to her primary responsibilities, Tovar leads trainings, mentors staff, works with families in classrooms and engages with local college students interested in the field.

Janel Boulis, director of Head Start, called Tovar "an essential part of the Head Start program," citing her dedication and ability to build strong relationships. EightCAP President Lori Johnson said Tovar "embodies everything this award represents" and reflects both the legacy of Lacy and the values that define the organization.

Tovar told the Herald the most meaningful part of her work is helping others recognize their strengths and potential.

"What gives me the most hope for our agency and the families we serve is that there are many extraordinary employees at EightCAP who are connecting with and empowering our children and families to set goals for themselves and reach them," she said.

As EightCAP approaches its 60th anniversary in 2026, Tovar said she remains inspired by the organization's mission and the opportunity to make a lasting difference. "We get to be life changers—how incredible is that?"

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