Let me be honest with you: I didn’t always want to be a nurse. I really wanted to be the next Barbara Walters. I wanted to work in broadcast journalism and write about fascinating people who have done fascinating things.

So, how did I end up here?

Well, I was a candy-striper in high school. How many of you were candy-stripers too? There’s a few. Being a candy-striper convinced me that I could easily combine the things I love — science, meeting fascinating people and sharing fascinating stories.

As long as I’m up here confessing, let me tell you: I’ve had a rocky ride. I was kicked out of nursing school the last semester of my senior year.

Doesn’t that sound like a bad movie on the Lifetime Network: “From Nursing School Dropout to Nursing Association President”? Let’s just say I was “challenged” by the experience of being asked to leave my nursing school.

Luckily, I transferred to another school where I was welcomed with open arms. So much was different from my first experience. It was the kind of program I wanted to be in. They lifted me up, and they believed in me.

They also made me realize something: We have to be willing to face failure and start over again with lessons learned. And let me tell you, when I say start over, I mean it.

Like many of you, in my 20 years of nursing, I’ve zigzagged through more challenges than a contestant on a TV game show. Challenges like not being selected into a trauma ICU internship. Not being assigned team leader in the PCU. Having my first patient off orientation bleed out. Failing my CCRN. Aren’t you guys glad you came to listen to me today?

Let me tell you: I even went to graduate school for one role and then realized the job just wasn’t for me.

So why am I telling you my long résumé of challenges and failures?
Because these challenges, these failures — in addition to all the good that has happened in my life — come together to make me perfectly imperfect. Everything that happened to me — good and bad — helped me understand a little bit more about myself. And it’s all led me to discover my absolute passion: bedside nursing.

This is what I am all about. It’s who I am.

I work nights. I usually leave for work each evening a little before 6. I park in the same spot nearly every shift. I take the long walk into the hospital. Of course I’m texting a few last-minute housekeeping things to my husband and kids. After clocking in and putting up my lunch, I glance at the charge board to see what awaits me — while scanning the synergy of the chosen assignments for the next 12 hours. I listen intently to the charge report. It’s all routine up to this point. But I know nothing about how the night will go. Despite that, I truly can’t wait to be at the bedside with my patients and colleagues.

I am always comforted by the strength of the nurses around me doing unbelievable and unimaginable things. Knowing them makes me a better nurse.

Let the Barbara Walters in me tell you about them. See if any of these sound familiar.

Jenna started within a month of me. She has unwavering patience. One night she had the ultimate “call-bell warrior” as her patient. It was only 9 o’clock and already the whole unit was commenting on 710’s overuse of nursing requests. Walking by her computer, I noticed a post-it note with one word: “serenity.” I asked her about the note. She said, “I truly can’t understand the position my patient is in. He’s waiting for a new heart. He’s scared. The note reminds me to remain calm, peaceful and untroubled when he calls. I am here for him.”

Then there’s Hisayo, an Army reserve nurse. She never misses a beat. She is always ready — room setup, bed zeroed with sheets you could bounce a quarter off. And I have! Her reliability is unmatched.

Or Merlita. She came to us from an international travel program. Her courage is undeniable. She is unassuming. Clinically, she is brilliant, and because she’s reserved she can give input into a situation without being overbearing.

Then there’s the “sheriff.” Her name’s Carol. She’s been on nights for years. It’s not uncommon for staff to suggest a patient might need a little “Carol therapy” if they are challenged with non-compliance or are slightly resistant to a plan of care. She practices with an iron fist ... but it’s in a velvet glove. Unquestioned, she practices with a disguised firmness many patients need.

And let’s not forget Neal. He’s great. He oriented me to the hospital when I started. His ability to break down complex things into the simplest solution makes him the go-to person. We all seek him out for his wisdom and his calm demeanor. He’s unshakeable.

These nurses all have grit — nursing grit.

Angela Duckworth is a pioneering psychologist and author. She says the secret to outstanding achievement is not talent but a special blend of passion and persistence. She calls it grit. She says it’s the hallmark of achievers — more important than IQ, social connections, physical health, even good looks.

So what is grit? It’s being dedicated, despite our failures, adversity or lack of progress. It’s having stamina. It’s sticking with your future plan day after day — not for a week or a month, but for years — to make your future a reality. Grit has been coined the “other 21st century skill.”

As I said, these nurses I work with have grit. I would bet on them every night to be unwavering, undaunted, undeniable, unquestionable and unshakeable.

Of course, when I talk about these nurses, it’s like I’m talking about every nurse I’ve ever known. You know what I mean? You work with nurses like this. You are a nurse like this.

I think of nursing as a string of barely noticeable things that add up to a mountain of wonderful.
Let me explain.

It’s like you have a baby and soon a bunch of barely noticeable things happen, and next thing you know you’re walking that kid to kindergarten.

And then a bunch of barely noticeable things happen. Then you’re walking that kid down the aisle.

Then a bunch of barely noticeable things happen again, and the next thing you know you’re holding your first grandchild.

The history of our profession is like that. Our timeline is filled with nurses who have done extraordinary things. It’s chock-full of stories of heroism, hardships, discovery, leadership and ingenuity. All \textit{unparalleled}. In hindsight, barely noticeable … almost ordinary.

I think it’s important for us to notice these things we do.

Like the CSI teams across the country whose projects have had an \textit{unprecedented} impact on steering the conversation from nurses being an expense to a wise investment. These teams have shown nurses’ capabilities. Teams eradicating DVT and surgical site infections. Exploring innovative staffing solutions. Engaging families to use journals to reflect on their stay and decrease post-intensive care syndrome. These nurse-driven teams are transforming healthcare with their bedside leadership.

And what about our chapters! Let me give a shout-out to all you chapter members. Growing up in chapters, I have witnessed their power, strength and wisdom. Simultaneously across the country, chapters are meeting the needs of their communities. Chapters, you have a special place in my heart.

And let’s not forget about social media influencers. Some of you might know me on social media by a different name. I owe that all to my father. Awhile back, he encouraged me to get a Twitter account. I quickly logged in and created a handle, at the time only known to him. It was a nickname he called me while I was in nursing school: Nurse Noodles.

Thinking I was going to use it to communicate back and forth only to him, I quickly realized how powerful this type of bold voice could be. I started to follow people, use hashtags and make connections with others in our profession — from the bedside to the boardroom.

Whole social movements start with a single tweet. Insights and compassion expressed in a few short characters can help us heal. And even best practices spread faster and faster by nurses speaking to one another online.

That’s how it works. One voice building on another. Soon it’s supported by someone else, viewed by another and then shared again. Before you know it, that small voice has a large influence. We have more power at our fingertips than at any other time in history.

Just think about how we work. Each shift, we handle hundreds of thousands of dollars of highly complex equipment, technology and medicine. But we still have to create workarounds, right? Within my own unit last week, I saw nurses using EKG electrodes on call bells for the visually impaired and putting gowns on upside-down with the legs through the armholes so a patient doesn’t pull out their foley or even need restraints.

We always find ways to take better and safer care of our patients. These barely noticeable solutions offer innovative alternatives and solve persistent problems. They’re just tricks of our trade. And we know how important it is to balance a “no idea is too crazy” philosophy with a practice backed with evidence. We need to be \textit{unflappable} in not allowing others to define our practice or limit how we work.

In other words, we need to use that other 21st century skill: grit. That’s how we nurses work. And our theme this year is in that spirit. Now, if you are anything like me, you’ve been trying to guess the theme. Like you, I impatiently waited through every NTI president-elect’s speech trying to see if there were clues, hints or giveaways. Did you guess it? Let’s see. Our theme for the year is \ldots \textbf{UNSTOPPABLE}!

We are nurses. We cannot be stopped from doing what’s right for our patients.

\textbf{Unstoppable} is knowing if we get knocked down, we get up again.
Unstoppable is using our unique talents to expose inefficiencies and celebrate positive, innovative solutions, no matter how small.

Unstoppable is gaining momentum from others — pushing each other to take certification exams, precept another RN or comfort a colleague.

As nurses, we are Unstoppable “from the inside out” when we practice self-care and stretch ourselves into the unfamiliar.

We are Unstoppable “from the outside in” by preventing adverse outcomes, courageously using our voice and pursuing the unimaginable to better ourselves and our profession.

I am humbled and privileged to serve as AACN’s 50th president. I look forward to traveling around the country for the next year meeting nurses.

Nurses who are filled with spirit and grit, like Jenna, Hisayo, Merita, Carol and Neal.

Nurses — like me, you, we, us, our AACN community — who are unwavering, unmatched and unshakeable.

But most of all: Unstoppable!