The following speech was delivered by Adrienne Kirby SNC ’79, president and chief executive officer of Cooper Health System, to the Class of 2013 at the Rutgers School of Nursing–Camden commencement ceremony on Thursday, May 23.

Good afternoon. Chancellor Pritchett, Dean Robinson, Board of Trustee members, Mr. Mortensen Mr. Rears, Mr. Rhodes and Mrs. Stanaitus, faculty members, parents and family members and graduates, it is an honor to stand before you today at the 2013 Commencement for the Rutgers University Camden School of Nursing.

Congratulations to the graduates and to the families who have supported them along the way. Celebrate and rejoice in your shared achievement today. You will look back with fond memories on this day. It is the beginning of a new journey in your lives.

Last week, I had the privilege to attend the School of Nursing awards ceremony and meet many of the graduates. I was extremely impressed by your academic and community service accomplishments. I was also honored to receive the Pioneer award and for that I sincerely thank you.

Dear graduates, there is so much I could share with you as you head out into the health care workforce with your new degrees and high expectations; both your expectations for your careers and the expectations that others will have of you. In the interest of time, I will focus my message to you on that which I believe is most important in helping you decide how you will approach your career. Now is the time for you to decide how you will “show up” every day. That requires conscious thought on your part about how you want to live your life as a nurse and how you want to be perceived by others. So I would like to share just a few lessons I have picked up over my years in health care that may help to guide you as you embark on your career.

I speak from experience. I began my career in 1979 at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania as a staff nurse with a new BSN from Rutgers University. That time in health care was very different than it is today. Technology was much less sophisticated and, more importantly, recommended nursing ratios were very loosely followed! I recall some nights when I was the only RN on a thirty-bed unit with assistance from aids and technicians. I learned early that in order to survive, I needed to be able to build relationships and inspire teamwork. Although ratios have certainly improved, care is so much more complex today.

As such, that early lesson still rings true. So the first lesson I would like to share with you is a lesson I learned very early in my career that continues to guide me each and every day; build relationships and respect and engage the team with whom you work. You accomplish nothing alone. Patient care really is a team sport requiring collaboration at every level.
After working as a staff nurse for several years, I moved into the management ranks, encompassing responsibility for nursing services and other departments while also expanding my education. I have had some interesting positions along the way, including working on a health care project in Kiev, Ukraine. These roles greatly broadened my perspective, particularly in the area of the importance of culture to an organization. Think along the lines that culture is to an organization what character and personality are to an individual. You are able to use your character and personality to influence the culture of an organization.

Let me give some personal examples. In my current role as President and CEO of Cooper University Health Care, I have responsibility for running the organization including the hospital, all the ambulatory sites and the physician organization. Having started my career as a nurse, I consider my clinical background invaluable in making decisions. I still understand what is happening at the interface between the patient and the nursing team. I often rely on my past nursing experience to inform how organizational decisions can impact those who provide care and service.

One aspect of leadership that I attribute to my experience as a nurse is my driving passion for quality and service. I think of it as a culture of quality and service. I sincerely believe that we have an obligation to do the best we can for our patients at every encounter. As a leader, and yes as a nurse, I believe that we can never have a bad day.

I have met many amazing people during my career, people who share that belief and bring a lot of heart and passion to what they do every day. I have observed excellence firsthand and people who exemplify the very best in nursing practice. They all possess the two key qualities of the profession – competence and compassion. When a patient feels that someone who possesses a combination of knowledge and kindness is caring for them, it makes all the difference in the world. So, lesson number two is the recommendation that you approach the delivery of patient care using both left and right brain thinking; both knowledge and technical skill (left brain), and kindness and compassion (right brain). Taking care of patients should be a mission, not just a job. Technical skill alone is not enough. In fact, it is expected. No one seeks health care thinking that we might get it right! Compassion and empathy distinguishes a truly great nurse and is the hallmark of nursing excellence in the public perception.

I have received letters about nurses who have touched patients in miraculous ways. I have also received letters that have been painful to read; letters about nurses who seemed not to care. It has been well documented that patients associate the overall impression of their health care experience with their impression of nursing care. Florence Nightingale understood this fact and over 100 years ago commented that nurses control the patient's environment by providing for warmth, cleanliness, quiet, hydration and nutrition. Think about that! Even with all the technology and all the care providers involved in the patient’s
care today, it is still the nurse who OWNS the patient’s environment. Patients will count on nurses to tend to their comfort as much as they do for nurses to provide the correct medication and therapies. Taking care of patients is special and important work and every nurse has an impact on the patient’s experience.

Now, I must be honest with you, nursing is hard work. But it is rewarding work. You have the power to truly make a difference in the lives of every single patient you touch. Never underestimate that power. More than any other individual or group, nurses have the biggest impact on the overall experience of care. You can choose to have a positive impact, you can choose to have a neutral impact, or sadly, you can choose to have a negative impact. You have that much power….use it wisely. So my third message to you is to recognize and use the power that you have to positively influence the patient’s experience at every single encounter. Another way of saying this is “ownership”. Understand that empowerment can not be bestowed upon you and that no one can empower you but yourself. Similarly, no one else can take away your desire to do the best every day.

Along with recognizing the power that you possess and empowering yourself to create a positive experience for your patient comes the obligation to not permit toxic emotional negativity into the way you care for your patients. In fact, do everything you can to eradicate it. Health care is experiencing tremendous upheaval and change and it is a challenging time to be in the field. Although that difficulty must be acknowledged, we must not allow the current demands to foster negativity. As a nurse, you have the power to influence the patient’s experience like no other discipline. Again, I implore you use that power wisely.

As nurses, you can foster an environment completely focused on creating an outstanding patient experience. A true Culture of Service unites everyone in a common mission of providing the best care and service to the patient. Being a nurse requires so much energy, empathy, compassion and selflessness. You will stand by people who are experiencing profound joy as well as profound loss. As excited as you are to jump in, there will be moments when you question yourself and your ability do the best for your patients. One of the approaches that I recommend to help you, one I use personally and the next lesson I am sharing with you, is to develop a personal code of conduct to guide you in how you approach your work.

At the personal level, a core value or code of conduct will shape how you think, how you build relationships, and how you respond to stress. One of my favorite examples can be found in the book “The Four Agreements”, by Don Miguel Ruiz. This book describes four major beliefs that can serve as your personal code of conduct, and these are: 1) Be impeccable with your word by speaking with integrity and saying what you mean, 2) Don’t take things personally (realizing that we are not the center of everyone else’s universe), 3) Don’t make assumptions
and 4) Always do your best. I would like to add one more and that is “own your own behavior”. Don’t worry what everyone else is doing. Do what YOU believe in and what you know is right.

I sincerely believe that you can be a more satisfied and successful nurse by following the recommendations I have described including building respectful partnership and relationship, using both competence and compassion equally when delivering patient care, ownership and positive use of the power that you have to create the very best patient experience, and using a personal code of conduct to guide your career and the way you interact with others. I have one more message I would like to share.

I would like to close by sharing a quote I have used to guide me throughout my career and that I believe if adopted across the health care field would certainly result in a consistent Culture of Service. Once again I refer to Florence Nightingale, as she so eloquently said many years ago “I attribute my success to this - I never gave or took any excuse”. In one brief quote, Florence Nightingale epitomized the concept of ownership and empowerment. This is the most important lesson I can share with you, don’t take excuses from others who are not doing their best for patients nor make excuses for your own behavior. Demand the best from others, and most importantly, demand the best from yourself! I hope this philosophy resonates with you as well!

I wish you much success and a joyful career. You will work hard, but that work can be extremely rewarding. Give it your all and be your best every day.

Thank you.