

Florida yoga studio shooting victim Dr. Nancy Van Vesseem worked to make community better

Ashley White, Tallahassee Democrat Published 7:43 p.m. ET Nov. 3, 2018 | Updated 10:14 p.m. ET Nov. 3, 2018



Dr. Nancy Van Vesseem dedicated her career to improving the health and wellness of people in the Tallahassee community.

An internist, and chief medical officer for Capital Health Plan where she worked for more than 20 years, she was largely responsible for the national recognition of the insurance group, said Assistant Medical Director Dr. Moritz Dehler.

"She was always looking for the best she could for the community at large," Dehler said. "Her vision of taking care of the quality of the doctors we engage and the affordability of keeping the health plan in reach of state workers and people who have access to it was her mission."

Van Vesseem, 61, was fatally shot Friday night when a gunman pretending to be a patron opened fire during an evening Hot Yoga Tallahassee class. Another woman, 21-year-old Maura Binkley, was killed and five others were injured. The gunman killed himself after the shooting.

Yoga was a safe haven for Van Vesseem, a private joy in life. Dehler worked with her for 15 years, the last decade or so in her role as CMO. He saw her Friday afternoon in the CHP parking lot as she headed out to the Friday night class. She had a big smile on her face.

"She worked endlessly with CHP but her getaway was going to yoga multiple times a week," he said.

The mindfulness preached in yoga intermingled with every other part of her life; she was a centered, optimistic, caring person.

"Whatever she touched, she wanted to make better," said Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare CEO Mark O'Bryant. "She just wanted people to be happy and healthy. She basically was all about other people."

Her family was one of the things that could always make her happy, he added. Van Vesseem raised three daughters, whom she adored.

"Just watching the smile on her face when she was talking about her family," O'Bryant said, "she would beam."

CHP issued a statement late Friday night when her death was confirmed. It lauded her work and lamented her shocking loss. It ended: "Our hearts are filled with sorrow and prayers for her family. We all have been so blessed to have Nancy in our lives."

Van Vesseem strived to make sure health care costs stayed low for those insured by CHP. She worked to educate medical students and practicing physicians.

"She cared about people and really was concerned about preventative medicine and improving the general health about where we live," said Dehler.

As a primary care physician, she took that approach with each of her patients. Audrey Byrne recalled that Van Vesseem treated her like a friend when she went through challenging health issues. After her second child, Byrne couldn't get out of bed. Van Vesseem ran tests and called with the results personally.

"She was very warm and empathetic. She really listened to her patients," she said. "She really looked into the symptoms and thought about the person holistically."

At Florida State, Van Vesseem was one of the first clerkship directors for internal medicine at its College of Medicine, the Dean of the FSU College of Medicine John Fogarty wrote in an email Saturday afternoon. Her involvement never let up. In May, she joined the community board for the Tallahassee Regional Campus.

She ensured CHP would support the College of Medicine's Bridge Program and hired physicians from it. When working with CHP patients, students could interact with electronic medical records thanks to Van Vesseem. She worked the College of Medicine and FSU Senior Health Program to bring a geriatric assessment clinic to CHP patients.

"She advocated every day for patient-centered care and was a vocal proponent of that approach to the way we teach our students," Fogarty wrote. "Dr. Van Vesseem has been a strong and valuable member of the College of Medicine faculty from our earliest days, making countless contributions both directly with our students and behind the scenes in ways that few people knew about."

Van Vesseem's death will be a loss to the medical community and the community as a whole, said Katrina Rolle, the president of the United Way of the Big Bend. The two worked together on the organization's health council for three years tackling topics such as pediatric dentistry and mental health.

Rolle kept her in the loop even after Van Vesseem stepped off the council. She would provide lists of resources to Rolle. She always offered a welcomed alternative perspective on a problem or situation.

Every conversation started with a smile and ended with a hug.

"She cared about her work and she cared about the community and the health of the community. That was clear with every conversation I had with her," Rolle said. "You could sit down with her and talk about something and leave there thinking differently about the topic."

It was part of her problem-solving nature. She had a positive attitude and believed that things could be fixed.

"I'm going to miss her a lot," Rolle said. "It's a tragic loss."

Contact Ashley White at adwhite@tallahassee.com or on Twitter [@AshleyyDi](https://twitter.com/AshleyyDi).