

MY Family



Meet Keri Judge

Keri Judge, also known as Nurse Keri, grew up in a small coastal town just north of Boston, called Swampscott. She spent her childhood there with her parents, her younger brother, and many extended family members. Her father was one of nine children, so she was always surrounded by aunts, uncles, and cousins. "Family has always been something that I was taught to recognize, value, and appreciate above anything else, and it was instilled in me at a very early age". She fondly recalls Sunday dinners where 20-30 family members would sit around the table feasting, laughing, and making jokes. At 18, Keri attended a small college just south of Boston, where she met her husband of almost 20 years, Luke. Together they moved to Hoboken, Singapore, and New Canaan, until finally ending

up in Delray Beach, ten years ago. Luke and Keri have 4 children, Thomas (14), Henry (11), Elliana (9), and Adelaide (6), all of whom attend Unity School.

What is the most gratifying aspect of being a school nurse? There are so many aspects, it's really hard to put into words. I believe that children need to feel well to be successful in school. They not only need to feel well physically but also emotionally. The best parts of my days are often seeing the children who need an extra hug, words of encouragement, or something simple to bolster their day completely. When I'm able to provide that and then see their whole demeanor change, it's everything.

A recent experience comes to mind when a young Kindergarten student got dropped off at the dock in the morning for school. He was a little slumped and seemed down, which was not like his usual self at all. Mom told me he had a rough morning and she was concerned about how his day was going to go. I went with my intuitions, following him in the gates and scooped him up. I asked him what was wrong and he simply said "I didn't get to wave goodbye to Mommy". With him in my arms, we ran back to the loading dock and waved as his mom rounded the corner to exit. She waved and blew kisses back and I felt this little boy's body change entirely. That was all he needed - one last wave from Mom. I told him that his mom was going to have the best day now and so was he. He jumped out of my arms and practically ran to class, happy as could be.

Being a school nurse is getting to know every student, parent, and staff member. It's about helping make every day a little bit better for anyone you can and caring about each of them like they are your own family.

What is your greatest personal achievement as a school nurse? It took some time when I started working at Unity to get to know all the kids and their different needs, but there's one child way back when that will always stand out in my mind. He was (and still is) intelligent, athletic, musically inclined, and kind to everyone. During his early elementary years, he would have headaches or stomach pain that his parents and I couldn't assimilate to anything. In upper elementary, he was so motivated and he held himself to such a high standard, that by the time he reached middle school, he developed severe anxiety. I was part of his journey and would be the

one right by his side when the anxiety would overtake him, during his 7th grade year. I spoke with his parents regularly but truly bonded with him. I got to know his passions, his triggers, and most of all, him. He does and always will hold a special place in my heart. I'm happy to say that he persevered. With his whole community at school, his parents, and his friends, he found the strength to overcome his anxiety and today he is more successful than I could have ever imagined.

Why did you choose to work at Unity School? I toured Unity and five other local schools when we moved from Connecticut in 2013. At the time, I only had one school-age child. It was important to us to find the right "fit" in a school for both Thomas and our family, and we wanted his school day to mirror our home life, providing support, encouragement, love, and challenges. Unity was the sixth tour I went on and we've never looked back. We knew the moment we stepped on campus that this was where our family was meant to be.

During that first year that Thomas attended school, I volunteered A LOT! I got to know the other parents, the teachers, and the inner workings of the school, and I loved every minute of it. Everyone was working towards the same ideals: supporting and encouraging our children while inspiring learning.

I wasn't looking to go back to work, but when I was offered a position at Unity, I couldn't resist. I wanted to be more involved in this amazing community that was helping to shape and nurture so many children.

What makes the Unity School health program unique? The Unity School Health Program has evolved tremendously in the last ten years but has also retained the values that make Unity School unique. I'm very fortunate to work with an amazing team of passionate, caring, and motivated nurses, which include Nurse Shelley Albe and Nurse Ely Lalane. Together, our daily goal is to provide every student, and every staff member, with incredibly individualized care structured to their specific needs, while also incorporating science-based evidence and the most current professional practice protocols.

Together, we've made significant changes to the way health care at the school functions. Like going mobile! The nurses at Unity no longer see students or staff in the clinic, instead, we go to each student or staff member's location on campus. Our nursing team carries packs of essential gear during the day, triages on the go, and communicates with parents and teachers in real-time. This keeps every child in the classroom, getting the important lessons they need, instead of standing in line at the clinic. It saves teachers and staff members time from tracking students' whereabouts and allows them to concentrate on their students. The result is that the students and teachers alike, miss dramatically less class time, which benefits everyone... and the nurses get their steps in!

What is your background and experience? I've worked as a registered nurse for over 25 years. I was one of those kids who knew at a very early age, maybe 7 or 8 years old, what I wanted to do. I loved science and math in school and always felt the want and need to take care of people. I attended an amazing nursing program at a small college just south of Boston, called Curry College. It was the first accredited nursing program in the entire state. I graduated with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Nursing in 1998 and then practiced in the emergency room, cardiology, and neurology units in some of Boston's top hospitals.

In 2000, I developed a love for taking care of mothers and their babies. In a matter of weeks, I quit my job, gave up my apartment, and moved to the NYC area to attend NYU's midwifery program. Over three years, I delivered more than 500 babies at hospitals, clinics, and at home, and most importantly, helped new mothers advocate for themselves and their babies. At the same time, I worked for a non-profit organization that not only brought health care services to the underserved communities throughout the five boroughs of NYC but developed changes to the overall state of health care in these communities by advocating at the state level. It was a life-changing experience that has stayed with me to this day.

I graduated from NYU in 2003, with a Master's of Science in Midwifery and a dual minor degree in Women's Health and Pediatrics. After graduating, I continued to work in a variety of hospital and clinic settings as both a midwife and a nurse practitioner, caring for underprivileged and underserved communities, throughout the New York and New Jersey areas.