

THE MAKING OF A NURSE

Shelly Kuhns, RN

Hello?... Yes, I am Mrs. Arnold... Yes, Ethel is my daughter and Gene is my son-in-law... I understand... We'll be there as quickly as possible... Thank you."

The above words are only one side of a phone conversation heard by a 6-year-old girl. It is incredible how that one moment in time set me on a direction that has remained steadfast for more than 29 years. My interest in the nursing profession began in early childhood and has been reinforced frequently throughout my life.

My initial plunge into the environment of healthcare came early and dramatically. From the day of that call my life was never the same. In that one moment it took the car in which they were riding to careen over an embankment, all the lives of my family members were sent into new irreversible directions.

Initially, my parents were just absent. My brother and I made the rounds of friends' and family members' homes. We had a few visits with my Dad in our local hospital; and one with my Mom when she was transferred there after 2 weeks in St. Louis. As were the rules in 1975, I was not allowed into the hospital room to visit them. My aunts and uncles lifted me to the first floor window of my Dad's room so I could see him there in traction and talk awkwardly through the screen.

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Formal home care did not exist then. What I experienced were the desperate efforts of my maternal grandmother to rehabilitate her 28-year-old once beautiful and articulate, now head-injured and horribly disfigured, daughter in her home. Looking back, I am amazed what sheer grit was able to accomplish without the benefit of home health nurses and physical therapy visits.

Midway through my Dad's 3-month hospital stay my first profound interaction with a nurse occurred. One late fall evening, as I stood on the lawn just outside my Dad's room, a male nurse came out to me. I recognized Mike as the son of my pastor, but was shocked to learn he was a nurse. He smiled broadly and hoisted me onto his shoulders. I learned later that he broke rules and was outspoken about the inappropriateness of not allowing children into their parents' hospital rooms.

As a result of the accident, my brother and I received a new mother. The one we knew was lost to us with the profound head injury she had received. She not only had a new personality, but also a new badly scarred face. Her balance was poor for more than a year, requiring her to lean on us at times to steady her gait. Needless to say, we were involved in her care.

Dad came home 3 months after the accident in a body cast. Already a polio survivor, the additional insult of a femur fracture to his "good leg" made mobility a Herculean struggle. Within a few years of the accident, the toll of his and my mother's physical challenges began to play out in

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episodes of depression. The depression progressed to hospitalization for major depression when I was in fifth grade.

In addition to the impact Mike the nurse had on me, a string of others came into my life. Carol, our school nurse, was the perfect example of intelligent concern throughout the stormy years following my parents' accident, and in my junior year in high school, an assembly featuring an ARCH (ARCH Air Medical Services, St. Louis, Mo) helicopter flight nurse planted a seed that grew into a career goal.

The miscarriage of my first child at the delicate age of 19 and the stormy pregnancy with my oldest son led to my introduction into the world of modern nursing. During multiple admissions to the obstetrics department at St. Joseph's Hospital, I had the opportunity to observe the best examples of articulate, intelligent women who were respected for their opinions and experts in their field.

I am drawn to nursing by the people. For me it can be summed up into the phrase, "It's all about the people." I cannot forget the need I had for someone to explain things to me, a liaison and an interpreter for the jargon. I guess you can say I feel called to guide others on the safari through healthcare. I shudder for those who enter healthcare, as near to a foreign country as can be experienced within miles of your home, without someone knowledgeable beside them.

Within healthcare I found a jungle as difficult to traverse as any in the darkest Africa. Unfortunately, people enter it in the most vulnerable of times they will ever experience. When encountering these novices in my world I cannot help but remember the confusion, the desperation, the vulnerability I experienced as a small girl outside that window.

In my years of trauma/surgical/burn intensive care unit nursing I was exhilarated by learning all that I could, not only to keep patients alive, but to share, educate, and lead family members through the jungle. In the emergency department it was the same thirst for information; gleaned not only for myself, but to be imparted to each patient, each visitor, even each coworker in need.

Admittedly, there are those golden moments. I relish the times former critically ill patients have approached me, with a look of endearment on their faces and expressing their thankfulness when I merely did my job. Even in the losses there is joy. The husband who came to visit our unit on Valentine's Day because he had no one to spend

the evening with since losing his wife at Christmas. He knew we would be there, that we would understand and that we would care. The young woman who I had completely forgotten, who stopped me years later to tell me how often she thinks of me and the comfort I offered her during her miscarriage. The grandmother who reminded me of the extra mile I went and the time I spent talking her 4-year-old grandson through stitches, so he would not have the violation of being strapped to a papoose board.

There are also the humbling times... Dexter, Katherine, Carissa, Alexis, Nikki... when I could only pray. Too numerous were their injuries that even with state-of-the-art healthcare available and all my knowledge, nothing could be done. Seared into my mind are their parents' faces and the weight of their mothers' bodies as I lowered them to the floor as they collapsed. They may have been just another distraught parent to others, overwhelmed by the too-sudden traumatic loss of their child. To me they are the culmination of what started 30 years ago in the mind of a little girl.

Someday soon when I am a nursing instructor, I hope to be asked by a prospective nursing student what about nursing is attractive. You can bet I will not discuss job availability, flexible schedules, salary, or benefits. Perhaps I will begin by saying something like this, "Let me tell you about the opportunity that exists to positively impact the worst day of a person's life."