

University of Wyoming Fay W. Whitney School of Nursing
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Alumni Speaker
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I am so excited to have to opportunity to talk with you all today. It wasn't too long ago that I was sitting in this same ceremony. So many expectations with so little understanding of what was about to actually unfold in the next two years of nursing school and in the rest of my career as a nurse. I had no idea what area I wanted to work in and really no idea what being a nurse actually meant. The past five years of school and starting my nursing job have been a series of ups and downs, tears and smiles, and ultimately an immense amount of learning. I am excited to share today a little bit about how I got started in nursing, tell a few stories I have encountered along the way, and finally, give some words of wisdom for you all as you start this amazing journey. I want you all to take a brief moment and revel in this decision you are making. You are about to make a commitment to *saving lives*. Each and every one of you is going to have a beautiful story to tell about your career as a nurse. Embrace this moment. Remember this moment.

As some of you may know, in your last semester of school you will be doing a senior practicum. Around November of my senior year, I discovered Jackson Hole was canceling their senior practicum student, and that was the place I was planning to do my practicum. This was troubling news, as I had everything set up to move to Jackson in January and no plan B. I remember sitting in my professor's office and her saying to me, "What do you think about Denver Children's Hospital"? I had honestly never thought about doing pediatrics, but I love kids and had only heard amazing things about the Children's Hospital in Denver. So, of course I said yes! It was a lot of work preparing applications, reviewing all my pediatric notes and textbooks, and setting up living in Denver. But that was the best decision I ever made, and it changed my life forever. I went on to get a job on the surgical specialty floor at Children's Hospital Colorado and starting my career as a pediatric nurse.

While working with kids is wonderful, there are many ups and downs and frustrations and victories. At times, kids can make it very challenging to follow the nursing process, which you will see throughout all spectrums of nursing. Sometimes you have to get a little creative. I had somewhat of a humorous situation a couple months ago while I was attempting to do some teaching about a feeding tube to a parent who was taking her little girl home that day, who would need feeds at home. This is normally a fairly uneventful process. However, this particular family was, well, wild to say the least. The mom was there by herself, and had her other child

with her too—the patient’s little brother. While I was trying to review important information about the feeding tube, her brother was running around the room screaming, spilled a bucket of crayons all over the floor, and was throwing plastic basketballs everywhere. Mom was attempting to control him by yelling at him throughout the whole process. So I would say something to mom, have her try to demonstrate it, and be interrupted by a, “Calm down! Go pick up those crayons! Stop screaming! Go to timeout!” About halfway through the teaching, a basketball flew through the air and hit me in the head. As you can see, nursing takes a whole bunch of creativity and patience.

Along with that, nursing has impacted me ethically in so many ways. I had a young patient admitted to our floor who had just been diagnosed with a brain tumor, and the outcome was not looking good. Our neurosurgery team had looked at all the options and found that surgery was out of the question based on the location of the tumor; and radiation and chemotherapy would likely not cure this form of cancer, but they were going to try. They gave this little girl only a few months to live, and had told the family this right before I took over as her nurse. How do you tell a mother that her little girl is going to die? How do you comfort a seven-year-old and tell her of something about which she would have no concept? How do you say there is probably no chance of her surviving when the mom has faith that a miracle will heal her? These are all thoughts that go through your head when you get to work. There is no good way to do this, and it really makes you question who you are as a person, and what kind of nurse you want to be. This is just one example of how nursing has changed me.

Working at this institution and working with kids has been the best introduction to the profession of nursing for me and what has shaped these changes in me. I have learned nursing is not all about knowing medications and diseases and how to perform something with sterile technique. I have learned you need to be incredibly creative at times to make things work for your patients and families. Not only are you performing medical tasks all day every day, but you are also a teacher to those who may not know the best parenting techniques, or even the most basic knowledge of what it means to be healthy. You are the shoulder a patient or parent cries on when they discover bad news—and many times you are crying with them. You are by their side for hours taking on their every need as if it were your own. We do this not because we have to, but because we want to. For some reason, we were born with a passion and a love for taking care of people, and empathy for other’s situations is just something we have. Now that you are beginning this journey, I have a few words of advice to take with you through it all.

First of all, *always* advocate for your patients. You will be put into many situations where you have to make some tough decisions, but the lesson I have learned is that it is always better to make the right decision for your patient, no matter who you have to stand up to or how you have to go about it. Not too long ago, I experienced a very simple example of this. I

had a little girl who had come in for a liver transplant. Most patients who come in for this procedure leave the hospital with a feeding tube and very basic formula to allow their new liver to heal before they start introducing more complex foods into their system, which was the plan for her. We got her to the point of being ready to go home, and I kept hearing from the medical team, “Everything *should* be set up for her discharge. Homecare *should* be delivering all her formula and supplies today.” For some reason on that day I had a feeling that something was not lining up, so I took it upon myself to actually find the number to the home care company and call them myself to make sure all of this that was supposed to be set up was in fact set up. Turns out, it wasn’t. Not to mention, this was a Friday afternoon, and parents would not have been able to get hold of the home care company until Monday, had they gone home and not had what they needed. We got it all figured out, and she was able to go home that day with everything she needed. The moral of this story is: follow your instincts, because if something feels off, it probably is. Use your resources to make the right things happen for your patients!

Secondly, take care of yourself! There are countless stories of nurses pouring themselves out into their patients and families and not taking care of themselves. If you are not healthy mentally, physically, and spiritually, there is no way you can take care of someone else and give your best. Take a lunch break at work. Go do something fun on your days off. Find someone you can talk to about your rough days and about your days of victory. Whatever it is that makes you a better you, do it! You will be a much better nurse short and long term.

Thirdly, take every opportunity as a chance to learn—not only as a student, but once you graduate as well. If there is something you have never done before, give it a try with the help of someone who knows what they are doing! Those are the times you will learn the most, and it will only make you more of a resource as you continue throughout your career. Go above and beyond to make sure the people you are working with know you are interested in learning all that you can. If someone offers up the chance to try a new skill or something you have never done before, even if you are nervous, *just try it!* This will shape the nurse you become and how you treat every opportunity in your career and even your life.

Finally, choose to love. Every time. We have no idea what someone is going through, or what brought them to the place they are in. I got a report from a nurse one morning saying how mean and upset a certain patient’s parents were throughout their whole shift. That can really change the way you enter a room, and the way you care for a patient. If someone gives you the idea that your day is going to be stressful or high maintenance, you can automatically choose to think that way, and your day will be affected by that decision. Because I had made the wrong decision before in my career and let this affect my patient care, I made the decision that morning to go in with a fresh set of eyes and see if I could change this situation. Just talking with the parents for a few minutes and hearing their concerns that morning changed

everything. They were in a much better mood, which in turn improved their child's attitude, and allowed them to be able to leave the hospital sooner. I'm not exactly sure what those parents learned from me that day, but I learned a very important lesson. Every time you go into a patient's room, or home, or wherever you may be with them, pause for a second and remember that they are a human going through one of the most vulnerable times in their life. All we can do is choose to love them and hopefully send them off with more information and wisdom than they came in with.

I truly do celebrate with you all now as you prepare to move forward into one of the most exciting, always changing, busy, and rewarding times of your lives. The profession of nursing has taken many twists and turns throughout the years, and many amazing things are happening right now. Much of that is thanks to individuals with passion that are committed to the well-being of our health care system, and a love for the people of the world. Remember that each and every one of you can and will make a difference in the lives you work with, and quite possibly at an even larger scale.

I will leave you with an anonymous quote that was one of my favorites throughout school, and something that continues to inspire me. "The definition of a nurse: To go above and beyond the call of duty. The first to work and the last to leave. The heart and soul of caring. A unique soul who will pass through your life for a minute and impact it for an eternity. An empowered individual whom you may meet for only a 12-hour period, but who will put you and yours above theirs." Congratulations on making it to this point. And never forget—each and every one of you is going to have beautiful stories to tell about your career as a nurse. Embrace this moment. Remember this moment.