

Always a dream to be a nurse... but there were serious roadblocks



Tonya MacDonald, RN, FNP

“My senior year [in high school] my parents divorced and the college money that was going to send me to nursing school was lost through court and attorney fees at the demise of my parents’ 25-year marriage.”

“I have always wanted to be a nurse; it was and has always been my calling,” says Tonya MacDonald. In a shoe-box stash of family photos, an old worn-at-the-edges Halloween picture shows MacDonald dressed up as a nurse complete with her nurse’s cap and Fisher Price® doctor’s bag. She was four years old. “Even as a young adolescent I never worried about my future or concerned myself with the question, ‘what will I be when I grow up’? At the age of 14 I completed a Regional Occupational Program (ROP) offered through my school and became a certified nursing assistant.”

But her parent’s divorce set MacDonald’s well-defined plans in disarray. Tonya remembers, “I was worried. I knew what this meant: it would impact my future. I was heartbroken. What was I going to do? My parents were involved in putting their lives back together. After all, I was 18—an adult by every definition—but I didn’t feel like one. I was scared and devastated.”

Tonya had visualized living in a dorm on a college campus, going to school, attending classes. But instead she went back to her part-time job she worked at when she was attending high school and enrolled in the community college in the small farming town where she grew up. “It certainly wasn’t the grand sprawling college campus I envisioned,” she says. “The disappointment set in quickly, but my ambition never waned.”

Joining the Air Force

“I had heard of the great opportunities in the military – especially in the medical field – and I had grown tired trying to do it on my own.”

So Tonya drove to a recruiting office in San Jose, California and signed up for the Air Force that very day – “not right out of high school like most do,” she says. “Instead I was 23 years old, working three jobs to pay my way through community college in hopes of completing my prerequisites to enter the university the following fall. In the Air Force all my dreams would come true, or at least I thought.” MacDonald shipped out to basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas in May; graduated and attended technical school in Wichita Falls at Sheppard Air Force Base; and then continued in Illinois at Scott Air Force Base.

Tonya’s training in the Air Force lasted over a year. Her first duty station was Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, where she began her career as a journeyman medic – “not a nurse, but good enough for the moment. I was in the medical field, so I was content with it for the time being. My training was exceptional in the military, and it really laid down the ground work for me to resume pursuing my nursing degree.” After a year at ‘Wright-Pat’ she was transferred to F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming. After settling

in, she began taking classes at the community college. “It was a positive step in the right direction, because I was pleased to learn that the college credits from Laramie County Community College (LCCC) in Cheyenne were accepted at the University of Wyoming – and the University of Wyoming had a [bachelors in science] nursing program. It took me five years to complete my first two years of a four-year degree. I took one class a semester until I was able to apply to UW. In March 2000 I was accepted into the nursing program as a junior and would begin at the end of August 2000. My second enlistment in the Air Force ended two weeks before – ‘perfect timing!’ I remember thinking.”

Finally! Nursing School!



MacDonald's graduation picture from the University of Wyoming

“I was 29 years old when I stepped onto the campus of the University of Wyoming for the first time as a student. My fierce ambition pushed me forward all these years, but it was a surreal moment –one I will never forget.”

“I was scared and nervous. The University of Wyoming School of Nursing was competitive and hard! I have always done well in school—some would even say exceptionally well—but my intelligence was pushed to the limits. ‘This education was not for the lazy uninspired student,’ I told my dad on the phone. He laughed, ‘That’s how they weed out the weak ones.’ Was he right? Well I have never thought of myself as weak. This made me work harder. I was not going to fail no matter what.” And in May 2002 MacDonald graduated from the University of Wyoming with a Bachelor’s Degree of Science in Nursing. Tonya’s dad came all the way from California to see her graduate. “That was by far one of the proudest and exciting moments of my life. No one in my family had ever graduated from college. I was the first, and my Dad beamed with pride.”

Correctional & Forensic Nursing

“Working in corrections, as you can imagine, is a pretty unique experience. You have to have precise judgment and communication skills in an environment that can become very hostile and volatile in a matter of moments. Add in the criminal element and who knows what the day will bring.”

MacDonald had moved back to California and stayed with her father while she awaited the go-ahead from the California State Board of Nursing to sit for her boards. Delays at the state level made it six months before she could sit for her boards—another disappointment. But when the opportunity came to take the exam, she passed the boards easily. “I know I can credit my education from UW for that,” MacDonald says. “I was well-prepared and confident.”

Her first nursing job right out of college was correctional nursing. “I have always been intrigued with correctional and forensic nursing,” says Tonya, “so for me it seemed like the obvious path to take. I accepted a position with the San Bernardino County Sheriff’s Department as a Registered Nurse Sheriff. I was a ‘jail nurse’ and loving life!!” She stayed with the sheriff’s department for five years and honed her skills as a nurse. “I learned to think quickly and concisely in any given situation, and I saw the human experience on many different levels every single day. It was quite a ride!”

Continuing on... with Graduate Studies & Emergency Nursing



MacDonald in the ER
at the Loma Linda University
Medical Center, California

It was at the end of MacDonald's fifth year with the sheriff's department that she started to think about going back to graduate school. "I had always known I wanted an advanced degree, and a master's in nursing seemed the logical next step," she says. "It was a big decision. I had to leave the security of a job I loved at the sheriff's department and the camaraderie of all my fellow 'jail nurses' and deputies. It is by far one of the best experiences of my life. I was no longer that shy, inexperienced nurse about whom all the 'seasoned' nurses in jail had placed bets—bets that I 'wouldn't make it' on my first week! I was really a good nurse. I felt I would be alright whatever direction I moved in."

"Emergency nursing in my mind has always been the pinnacle of a nurse's career. I don't know—maybe because of the long hours, emotional involvement with patients, and the life and death struggles you see your patients endure."

Not everyone can do the job of emergency nursing, and many don't want to. The burn out rate is enormous and the experience is life changing. But MacDonald immediately accepted a job after leaving correctional nursing at the world-renowned Loma Linda University Medical Center (LLUMC) in Loma Linda, California as an Emergency Room (ER)/Trauma nurse for the 70-bed ER department. "LLUMC treats approximately 70,000 patients a year in their emergency department, and the work done by the nursing staff is exceptional," MacDonald comments. "It was during this time I also returned to school and began 2 ½ years of working three graveyard shifts in a row just so I could attend school during the day. It was brutal, and I look back and don't know how I did it. It was my constant friend of pure driving ambition—the friend that never left me—that enabled me to accomplish the goals I set out before me."

Remembering why I do what I do

"The experience I gained at Loma Linda proved that I had made the best decision thus far in my nursing endeavors to go there," says Tonya. "But the hours and long days with no sleep—sometimes 40+ hours at a time—placed a toll on my body. I battled fatigue, pneumonia, mental and physical exhaustion. But one night I was taking care of a certain lady. It was definitely one of those epiphany moments you hear people tell you about—a moment that made me proud to be a nurse, but ashamed all at the same time. I was working my last of three nights not wanting to face the next day. I knew it was still going to be about another 24 hours before I even saw my bed. I was miserable and all I wanted was my warm fuzzy PJ's and sleep. I had just discharged one of my three patients, and before I could catch my breath and get caught up on some paperwork, the charge nurse brings me another patient. 'Come on', I remembering saying to myself. My next patient was a woman about 55 years-old, very attractive for her age, and soft spoken and genuine. 'Good,' I thought to myself; 'at least she's pleasant.'"

Tonya's new patient was battling cancer that had metastasized throughout her body, and the pain had become too much to bear at home. "I always sympathized with my patients who had cancer. Two years before this I lost my

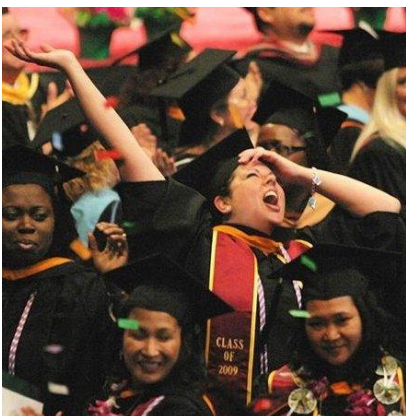
Daddy to cancer, so these patients always pulled on my heart strings.” Tonya got her settled and performed the normal routine of her first assessment: blood work, IV, and pain meds. Several hours passed. It was in the early hours of the morning.

“I was doing a routine set of vital signs when she says to me, ‘What’s wrong?’ ‘Oh nothing’, I smiled. ‘No’, she says, ‘what’s wrong?’ Her insistence brought forth great detail from me of what my last year had been like. She seemed to have this great interest in my well-being, like a mother questioning me: ‘Are you getting enough sleep? Are you eating well?’ Which of course I was not! Then she said it. She said the words I never expected her to say. In her small weak voice she tells me, ‘I am a nurse.’”

“Well, of course I haven’t been able to work since I became sick,” Tonya’s patient said as she began speaking in depth about her own nursing career. Then she said words that changed how Tonya perceived everything in her nursing career from that moment until now: “I would give anything to be able to do what you are doing now. I miss being a nurse more than I could ever express. You’re lucky that you are young and healthy.”

It is an almost unspoken rule in an ER setting that nurses are to be stoic and not show emotions. “But at that moment I could feel the tears well up in my eyes,” says Tonya. “My patient saw it too and patted my hand. I excused myself to the restroom. I don’t know if it was exhaustion or her words, but I wept and felt ashamed. Here I was doing what my whole life I had wanted to do, and I had the nerve to complain. From then on, it did not matter how tired I was, or how ‘burned out’. I went to work happy that I was allowed to do what I truly loved! Every day is not a guarantee: I knew that! I saw life slip away from people every single night. My life, my career in nursing, was a blessing!”

Family Nurse Practitioner!



In joy over her graduation with master’s degree!

The moment had arrived on June 6th, 2009. Tonya graduated with honors with a master’s degree in nursing and her advanced degree—Family Nurse Practitioner. “My joy and excitement was unparalleled to anything I have experienced thus far.” She quickly began working in a family practice clinic for a doctor with whom she had worked in the ER at Loma Linda. She also returned to correctional nursing and worked two days a week at the San Bernardino County Probation Department Juvenile Hall. During her OB/GYN clinical rotation, she was mentored by a doctor who also employed her for one-day-a-week coverage in clinic while he performed surgery. “So my new position as a nurse practitioner (NP) opened many opportunities to me in lightning-like fashion!” says MacDonald. “I was on my way to bigger things and ready for the challenge!”

Wrapping Up



MacDonald at the ER helipad in Jackson, Mississippi during her UW Choice Based Clinical

Tonya’s career in nursing has come full circle—not over by any means! But her career has returned back to her roots where her nursing began almost 10 years ago. After working in Southern California for nearly two years as an NP, she decided to make yet another change. Early July 2011, she interviewed for a position in Chester, California, population 2,316. “Chester is very rural,” says MacDonald. “I remember when I was driving into this town that I wanted to be here, even before I had interviewed or even ‘landed’ the job. I drew from all my teachings and my nursing education at the University of Wyoming, where the major emphasis was always rural nursing and how to serve the underserved. I loved that after 10 years of nursing, experiencing many things and acquiring a wealth of knowledge from those experiences, I would return to the basis of my nursing education – rural nursing! I accepted the position of Family Nurse Practitioner (the only one there) and Clinic Manager for Lake Almanor Clinic in July of this year. Accepted it without hesitation or reservation. I knew I would be able to really forge out a place in this very rural small community due to the leadership skills, the education I received from both my bachelor’s and master’s degrees, and my nursing career up to this point. I want to make a difference in people’s lives; I want to make an indelible imprint on the profession that I have loved since the beginning of my time.”

MacDonald wrote a small piece before she graduated from the University of Wyoming about her “choice-based” clinical rotation. It told of a story of a young boy whom she encountered during her time in the ER in Jackson, Mississippi. “I still think of that young boy from time to time, who by now is a young man in his 20’s. But now when I think about him, I also think about ALL my patients as well that have impacted my career. Good, bad, indifferent—every one of them taught me something. As I reflected and wrote down my thoughts for this essay, I again think back to that young boy in Mississippi. I ended my narrative about him with this: ‘...and it is these things that have made all the difference for me.’ So many years ago as a young nurse I knew even then that it would be the patients, the nurses, the experiences that would continue to be ‘these things that have made all the difference’ and it still stands true today.”