

Reflections on NURSING

a divergent path

By Katharine Hungerford, Professor,
Lambton College, Sarnia

“where do I start?”

By Heather Masson, RN,
Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre

During my nursing education, there was little emphasis put on the community from a clinical perspective. I spent the first year-and-a-half of my career working on a labour and delivery unit and then worked on an in-patient psychiatry unit. But when I began working in the community with people living with severe mental illnesses like schizophrenia, I gained a true understanding of what it is like to care for the whole person. I wasn't faced with making the decision of “Where to start her IV?” but rather, “Where do I start?” It may not have been in my “job description” to clean a client's room in a shelter, but I knew if I didn't, she may be in jeopardy of losing her housing.

In my opinion, it's these “little” things nurses do each day that go above and beyond what we learn in textbooks and make a real difference in our patients' lives. I believe we should treat our patients as we would want our own family members to be treated.

One day, 30 years of commitment and caring were suddenly all over! I quickly learned how a few words could completely change the direction of a life. There wasn't a warning. Doing an excellent job doesn't guarantee protection from job loss. It felt like someone had knocked the wind out of me. All the guideposts had been moved; in a moment, changed. Job loss is a serious source of grief and damaged self worth.

That summer three years ago loomed long ahead of me. I was too young to retire, and staying home was lonely. But there was a colleague's suggestion to think about – would I be interested in teaching nursing? I had only dreamed of this – it had seemed like an unattainable goal. It took weeks to decide, but, finally, I thought: OK, I'll try!

Then the enormity of what I had done hit me. Soon, it was August. I had the books and the syllabus, and I could read. But somehow, I knew that wasn't going to help me when I stood in front of 40 students in a few short weeks. My family convinced me I needed a laptop – best if it was Bluetooth-enabled with a docking station and interchangeable batteries. I didn't even understand some of the words my son was speaking.

The first day of class arrived. The classroom had rows and rows of seats, panels of buttons for lights, and a screen that went up and down automatically. My sense of panic was slowly turning into terror. I then realized I had even forgotten my son's advice to “dress cool.” As it turned out, I was wearing one blue sock and one black, with sandals. That doesn't describe cool.

My students started arriving. There had to be more than 40. I had my Bluetooth-enabled wireless laptop set up – and nothing worked. I called the technology support staff, who pushed one button to fix it all. I survived that first class.

I thank my students for the wonderful gift they gave me that day. I was a beginner again. They didn't know I was grieving my earlier job loss. I had the wonderful opportunity to meet future nurses, people who will make a difference in others' lives. They gave me back far more than they could know.