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“I Am a Critical Care Nurse” features the extraordinary in a critical care nurse’s ordinary experiences. To be featured in this department, contact Critical Care Nurse via e-mail at ccn@aacn.org.

Why did you become a nurse?

I love taking care of people. When I was in my 40s I decided to go back to school. I was an avionics technician and the next logical career move was engineering. I remember thinking, But I don’t want to be an engineer! My mother had recently survived a bad stroke and after seeing the care and comfort the nurses provided her, I knew nursing was what I wanted to do. I started nursing school on my 50th birthday!

What about your job as a nurse makes you happy?

Helping someone who is critically ill feel better is my favorite part about being a nurse. Administering medications is just a part of that; giving hands-on care, talking with patients, and giving backrubs and baths all seem to aid patients too, whether they are sedated or alert and oriented.

The most exciting thing about critical care is the constant learning. In the intensive care unit (ICU), every day is different. One day I learn to care for a patient who has had a Whipple procedure and the next day I may learn to care for a patient with sepsis from a urinary tract infection. It always amazes me how 2 patients, even with the same diagnosis, are so completely different medically.

What has been the most amazing experience you’ve had as a critical care nurse?

I had been on my own for about 2 months in the ICU when I experienced my first code. All of a sudden my patient couldn’t breathe and turned grey. I called in my supervisor and we called the code. It was like the cavalry arrived! All my ICU colleagues were there and helped make the crisis a smooth process. We intubated the patient and got her back. After all the excitement I was quite dazed. I remember thinking, Was she a full code? I checked the chart and of course she was. My eyes started to tear up. A nurse I did not know well hugged me and told me I had handled my first code well. She said, “Welcome to ICU.” The support and knowledge I have received from my fellow nurses have contributed to my best experiences as an ICU nurse.

What are the challenges you encounter and how do you overcome them?

My first year as a new graduate in the ICU was the scariest situation I have ever faced. There were nights I would cry on my way to work. My courage came from my husband’s support and knowing that when I got to work, if I struggled, there would be help. I knew that I would learn more every shift and that eventually I would “get it.” I have a great friend from nursing school who started in an emergency department the same day I started in the ICU. We called each other for moral support and it helped both of us survive the first year. We still call each other, but now we laugh more than cry.

What has your journey as a nurse been like?

In nursing school I couldn’t believe how much we had to know, but after my first year in critical care I feel like all that I learned in school was really only about 10% of what I need to know. My 2-year journey has been all about learning by experience. The more I learn and the more different types of care I’m able to give, the better the nurse I will be.

At the end of a busy day, how do you find balance in your life?

If a patient is worse when I leave my shift than when I arrived, it’s hard to take. I handle it by going over the night in my mind on the way home. When I get home I talk about it and then put it aside until my next shift. Getting together with friends who are nurses in other areas and comparing experiences always helps too.

How has AACN played a role in your career?

I joined AACN as soon as I started working in the ICU, as recommended by some of the nurses in the unit. I read the journals and get insight from them. I also went to a Critical Care Summit in San Antonio, Texas, in 2011. It was an amazing experience and it has helped me become a more active member in my unit.
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