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DANIEL JOHNSON

CHOSEN BY NURSING

Even in fourth grade, Clarke had a desire to work as a nurse

TAMMY REAL-MCKEIGHAN
News Editor

If she hadn't become a nurse, Christy Clarke might have wanted to own a coffee shop. Or she might have owned a business where people come to make artwork.

"But I could never give up all the help that I give people every day," she said. "I would never change

what I do."

A former intensive care unit nurse, Clarke is a registered nurse who works in pre-op and post-op/recovery — helping patients before and after surgery — at Methodist Fremont Health.

She's also among local nurses nominated by a community member and who then received enough readers' votes to be featured in a story as part of National Nurses Week.

She and other nurses are being honored for going above and beyond and putting others first.

Clarke's interest in nursing began

years ago.

"I decided to become a nurse in the fourth grade," she said.

Clarke recalls an assignment asking her to explain what she wanted to be when she grew up.

She chose nursing.

"I loved to care for people, even back then," she said. "I've always been drawn to helping people, to helping them feel better and to making them laugh. I felt that nursing was the best way I could accomplish that."

She appreciates good humor.

"I've always been a comical person by nature," she said. "I got

that from my dad. He's a funny person and we pretty much find humor in about anything."

Clarke's journey into nursing didn't start right away. She was a waitress while in high school. After graduating from Fremont High School, she went to Clarkson College of Nursing in Omaha, graduating from there in 1996.

She worked at the former Arbor Manor, before coming to work at what is now Methodist Fremont Health in 1998. She began working in medical telemetry. She then trained to work in an intensive care unit, where she worked for 18

years, making great memories and great friends among colleagues.

Clarke then worked at Med Express Urgent Care for a few years, working per diem in the pre-op/post-op department at the hospital.

In September 2020, she started working full time in the hospital's pre-op/post-op department.

Clarke notes how her career path has changed. The rewards she reaped during the first 18 years of her career were different from what she now experiences.

Please see **CLARKE**, Page 7



DANIEL JOHNSON

A CHALLENGING TIME

Nurse recalls times caring for very ill patients in the ICU

TAMMY REAL-MCKEIGHAN
News Editor

Sarah Knuppel and her colleagues didn't know if the man would survive.

He was so very sick.

But he had an incredible will to live.

Knuppel is a registered nurse who works in the intensive care unit at Methodist Fremont Health.

Nurses like Knuppel have been on the frontlines in the fierce battle that is the COVID-19 pandemic.

An ICU nurse for about 20

years, Knuppel recalls the high-acuity patients in that unit during the pandemic's early months. She took care of very sick patients, while communicating with loved ones who couldn't see them.

Her work hasn't gone unnoticed.

Knuppel is among local nurses nominated by a community member and who then received enough readers' votes to be featured in a story as part of National Nurses Week.

She and other nurses are being honored for going above and beyond and putting others first.

Looking back, Knuppel recalls that she always loved taking care of people and animals.

"I always had that real interest in science like biology and anat-

omy," she added.

She joined the nursing program at Midland University and took Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) classes.

Knuppel was a college senior when she began working at what's now Methodist Fremont Health. Knuppel graduated from nursing school in 1998. She started working on the medical-surgical floor and, after two or three years, took classes to work in the ICU.

The pandemic would prove to be the most challenging part of her nursing career.

"In the beginning of the pandemic, we were taking care of many acutely ill patients, more than we'd ever cared for," she said.

The work was hard physically

and emotionally.

Knuppel always had a heart for taking care of the sickest patients.

"This was a whole other level of things we'd never seen before so we had to figure it out," she said.

For instance, nurses learned that putting patients on their stomachs helped them breathe better.

In those early times — with so many unknowns — medical professionals also feared bringing the virus home to their own families.

And one of the hardest parts has been families not being able to be there when their loved ones are so sick.

"You have to talk to them on the phone or some Facetime their family, but otherwise you're giving an update on the phone and I

can't imagine how difficult that would be to be on the other end, sitting at home, feeling helpless," she said.

Throughout the years, Knuppel believes one of the best parts about her job has been getting to know patients and learning about their lives. She's enjoyed hearing about what they did for a job and their life experiences.

"You learn a lot of fun stories," she said.

When patients aren't allowed visitors and have lots of alone time, the nurse is the one they talk to if they want to get something off their chest or tell a joke or talk about their life.

Please see **KNUPPEL**, Page 7



Jodi Rinne, far left, stands with employees at CHI Health Lakeside in February 2019.

BONDING WITH PATIENTS



COURTESY PHOTOS

Jodi Rinne, director of maternal child services at CHI Health Lakeside, has worked at the Omaha hospital since December 2018.

Jodi Rinne enjoys teamwork, bonds made at CHI Health Lakeside

COLLIN SPILINEK
Fremont Tribune

Looking back on her previous nursing positions in obstetrics, Jodi Rinne said nothing beat the bonds she made with her patients.

"You help them through a once-in-a-lifetime experience and you get to see a miracle every single day," she said. "And so I left the day knowing that I bonded with my patients and did a good job."

Now as director of maternal child services at CHI Health Lakeside in Omaha, Rinne, who

lives in Fremont, leads the department's labor and deliveries, postpartum and the newborn intensive care unit.

Born and raised in Grand Island, Rinne's love of nursing came from her mother, an obstetrician.

"Growing up, for as long as I can remember, she would always ask all of my friends, 'Have you ever considered nursing as a profession?' she said. "I mean like, all the time, even if they already had their minds made up."

Rinne's relationship with CHI Health started in high school, as she would volunteer as an escort at CHI Health St. Francis.

"I shadowed a nurse in high school and got labor delivery experience, and I just fell in love with

it," she said. "So I always knew I wanted to go into women's health, labor and delivery, postpartum."

Rinne attended Clarkson College in Omaha, where she received her bachelor's degree in science and nursing in 2008. During her time there, she worked as a medical surgical aide, as well as a nurse's aide.

"I think the nurse's aide position made me a better nurse," Rinne said. "Because then whenever I was a nurse, I made sure that I always helped the whole team and knew that everybody was an important part of the job."

After graduating, Rinne worked as a labor and delivery nurse at Methodist Hospital in Omaha and in 2011, she became a charge nurse at Methodist Women's

Hospital. That same year, she received her master's degree.

Eventually, Rinne took her first management job as nurse manager at Gottlieb Memorial Hospital in Chicago. Again, she said her mother was an inspiration for moving up the take the role.

"She's always enjoyed her job as a director, and I was pretty big into sports and athletics in high school, so I always enjoyed the leadership aspect of whatever I was doing," she said.

After moving to Fremont and working another director position in Council Bluffs, Iowa, Rinne started work at CHI Health again in December 2018.

In her position, Rinne manages the nurses and scheduling, as well as making sure the proper

“It’s a profession that you can make a difference every single day when you show up at work, and I think that’s pretty cool.”

Jodi Rinne

policies and procedures are in place for evidence-based care.

“As a director, you obviously don’t get that bedside patient care,” she said. “If it gets busy, I’ll still chip in obviously to help, but as the unit grows and develops and transforms to a great culture, that’s what you thrive off of as a director.”

With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Rinne said she’s had to deal with changing circumstances while making sure that her staff and patients were remaining safe.

“It was just constant changing and communication,” she said. “I was very connected at that time to all the communication coming



As a floor nurse, Jodi Rinne holds a newborn baby she helped deliver. Rinne has held nursing positions in Omaha, as well as director roles.

out because I had to make sure we protected the nurses and the patients.”

Rinne said she was thankful for her staff members’ caring and compassionate dedication to the



Jodi Rinne, far right, poses with a couple whose baby she helped deliver as a nurse.

people they serve.

“They take care of your loved ones, they work on holidays, weekends, nights,” she said. “And they do it because they love it and they do it because they want to

take care of people and make a difference.”

Even with the pandemic and lack of information toward the beginning, Rinne said her staff are still willing to give everything

for their work.

“It’s a profession that you can make a difference every single day when you show up at work,” she said, “and I think that’s pretty cool.”



Jodi Rinne, left, stands with her husband, Jerry. Jodi Rinne is director of maternal child services at CHI Health Lakeside, while Jerry Rinne is president and CEO of the Fremont Family YMCA.



Thank you, nurses. You are our heroes.

This year, we cannot say “thank you” enough to the brave nurses on the front line. When the coronavirus swept into our communities, you answered the call.

Every day you put the needs of others first. Doing the job you were called to do. You never give up. And once this pandemic is over, we will still find nurses in the same place – being the heroes you have always been.

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Jamie Vanek sits in front of her desk at Johnson Crossing Academic Center.

NOAH JOHNSON PHOTOS,
FREMONT TRIBUNE

FINDING HER PASSION

FPS nurse Jamie Vanek reflects on career in healthcare

NOAH JOHNSON
Fremont Tribune

Immediately after Jamie Vanek and her husband had their first child, she knew she wanted to become a nurse.

Vanek and her husband had their daughter a year after graduating from high school. Having their child at a young age left Vanek feeling scared and acutely aware of the

stereotypes that accompany having children while young.

However, she said the nurse that cared for her during that journey never carried any judgment. In a way, her care helped Vanek find her passion.

"The nurse I had was so amazing and from that moment on, I knew I wanted to do that," she said. "I wanted to be that person for someone."

Vanek was one of several area nurses nominated by the Fremont community as one of the top nurses in the area. She then received enough votes from the

Fremont Tribune's readers to receive the recognition.

Vanek attended nursing school and has since compiled a 20-year career in the field that has included positions in labor and delivery to pediatrics. She even participated in a cancer prevention study at Creighton University.

Throughout her career, Vanek said her favorite part of the job has been building relationships with families.

"The whole family is so important to me," she said.

Vanek, a graduate of Fremont High School, returned to Fre-

mont Public Schools to care for children. She's worked for the district at Johnson Crossing Academic Center for the last three years.

The last year has been a difficult one for Vanek. Caring for children amid the COVID-19 pandemic has been a monumental undertaking, but she said she's proud of the work nurses across the district have done.

"It's just been a lot of extra responsibilities, precautions and so forth that we've had to do," she



Jamie Vanek has worked in the nursing field for the last 22 years, with the last three having been at Fremont Public Schools.

Please see **VANEK**, Page 7

Clarke

From 2

"I could watch the progression of critically ill patients and watch them get better and that was my reward day to day being a bedside nurse," she said.

As a pre-op/post-op nurse, she generally sees healthy patients who come for surgeries.

Clarke said her rewards now come in being able to comfort patients and help them have the best surgical experience possible by easing their anxiety.

"That's what's great about nursing," she said. "There's so many different areas you

can work in and I think that each one of those areas has a different type of reward."

She recalls her saddest moment, which occurred years ago.

"It will always be with me," she said. "It was my very first Mother's Day as a mother myself."

She worked three, 12-hour shifts that weekend. During that time, she developed relationships with patients and their families.

It was tough to see patients in the hospital on Mother's Day.

Then two of her patients passed away within 10 minutes of each other.

Rewards that day came from being able to help the

"I could watch the progression of critically ill patients and watch them get better and that was my reward day to day being a bedside nurse."

Christy Clarke

patients' families.

"To be able have a relationship with those families and comfort them during their time of loss, that was comforting to me," she said.

Like other nurses, Clarke knows she'll face happy and sad times.

"That's part of life; that's what nurses do," she said. "We're there for good times and we're also there, unfortunately, for bad times and

that's what we're meant to do. We're meant not only to comfort the patients, but we're there for the families as well."

She's received heart-touching notes from families.

Just before Easter this year, a surgical patient sent flowers.

"That was very nice," she said.

Such gestures don't happen real often.

"But when it does happen, it does touch your heart and brings you back to the reason why we do this and work so hard at what we do," she said.

Why would someone work long, tiring hours?

"I've always been a firm believer in that everything happens for a reason and I truly think nursing chose me," she said.

Clarke appreciates the knowledge she's gained because of nursing.

"I've had a lot of things happen in my life that would have had drastically different outcomes if I didn't have the knowledge that I do have because of nursing," she said. "It's that knowledge that has been able to help my family

when they've been in need and I've been able to touch the patients' lives along my career and it's been very rewarding to me."

Clarke appreciates her supportive family, who include her parents, Art and JoAnn Logemann; husband, Kevin; and children, Morgan, Jacob and Emma.

"I could never have worked those long hours without the support of my husband," she said. "He always cooked. Our kids are pretty much grown now, but when I would work the 12-hours shifts all the time, he would always cook for the kids."

And Clarke continued — and still continues — to help patients.

Knuppel

From 3

That's rewarding.

One of the most rewarding parts of her job has been the great friends she's made during her years at the hospital.

During the pandemic, nurses coped by relying on each other.

"After we'd get home, we'd call each other and

talk about our day and do a little decompressing and motivating each other," she said.

She's appreciated the camaraderie.

"There was a lot of teamwork," she said. "It felt good to be part of team and everybody knew their responsibility."

If she hadn't become a nurse, Knuppel might have become a professional organizer. Or she might like

running a drive-through coffee shop.

"Coffee is so important to people and it makes people happy," she said.

Yet Knuppel is glad she chose nursing.

"You get to be in a position that not very many people get to be in — seeing people at their worst or their best," she said. "It's rewarding to take care of somebody multiple days in a row and see them get

better. Sometimes, they don't get better and it's being able to keep them comfortable and supporting the family in times of death and dying."

She recalls a very tender time during the pandemic.

"We took care of a gentleman during the pandemic, who was very, very ill and we didn't know if he was going to make it out of the hospital or not, but he had this internal drive in him

— that he was going to do everything he could to get better," she said. "I think if we would have asked him to stand on his head, I know he would have done it."

"We had him lying on his belly," she continued. "We had him doing so many things and he got better."

She remembers the day he left the hospital.

"He left in a wheelchair to go home with his wife and he gave us all great big

hugs," she said. "He was crying and we were crying and he was so grateful to us, but I remember telling him that he was the one who did all the work. We just helped. He did all the hard work — everything we asked and more."

Knuppel noted something else.

"You spend a lot of time with people," she said. "It's hard not to become close to them."

Vanek

From 6

said. "But I think it's been a good thing, because I think that the pandemic taught us a lot about how to manage a situation like this."

At the start of the school year, Vanek said she was sending a large number of students home due to potential exposure to the virus. She said diagnosing students became difficult due to the broad nature of the symptoms COVID-19 presents.

"You couldn't differentiate between Monday

morning blues or whether they were truly sick sometimes," she said.

That task became easier as the school year progressed, Vanek said.

"We made some adjustments along the way," she said. "... I really feel that that helped us along the way," she said.

Vanek said she has loved every moment of her 20-year career in nursing. She never set out to work with the expectation of recognition, which made the award even more special for her.

"I love my students," she said. "I've always been

that type of nurse where my heart goes into every patient that I've ever had."

The true reward in her job is being able to see and care for her students every day, Vanek said.

"There's so many challenges for them," she said. "There's so many obstacles at young ages they have to endure and you know that they come down every day to you because they just need that extra little bit of support."

The award also represents the strong level of support and communication between the team of nurses at FPS. While small

in numbers, Vanek the nursing staff at FPS has worked hard to collaborate and care for students across the district this year.

"It goes down to everyone making sure that we're communicating everything so that we can provide the best care at school for our

students," she said. "As little as we are for our nursing staff, I feel like we have a lot of support as well from administration."



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FINDING HER CALLING

Nurse recalls good, sad times, cherishes moments with patients

TAMMY REAL-MCKEIGHAN
News Editor

Sybil Porter knows a hug can make a difference.

Porter is a registered nurse at Methodist Fremont Health, where she and her colleagues have worked through some of the most intense times of COVID-19 pandemic.

As medical-surgical and ICU nurse, Porter describes those time as a blur. She's had more sad moments in the last year than she cares to recall, but she's had some good ones, too.

She remembers a woman who was being discharged from the hospital and sent to a long-term care facility. The patient wanted to see her daughter.

But her daughter had COVID.

"We made it possible for them to have a Facetime call before she was discharged from the hospital," Porter recalled.

As the woman was leaving, she made a wistful comment.

"I wish I could hug you," the woman told Porter, adding that it was a moment she needed so she could get better.

Dressed in her Personal Protective Equipment, Porter was ready to help.

"Just hug me. I've got my PPE on," Porter said. "You just hug me."

So they hugged.

"It was emotional," Porter said. "We both cried, you know, kind of happy tears," Porter said, adding, "From what I know, she's doing OK."

Porter is among local nurses nominated by a community member and who then received enough votes from readers to be featured in a story as part of National Nurses Week.



DANIEL JOHNSON

Sybil Porter is a medical-surgical and intensive care unit nurse at Methodist Fremont Health.

She and other nurses are being honored for going above and beyond and putting others first.

Porter's journey into nursing began years ago.

"I really had no idea what I wanted to do out of high school," she recalled.

So her mom, Mary Denison, suggested she take some Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) classes.

"That way, you can make some money while you're deciding what you want to do," her mom said.

Porter discovered she liked helping the nurses and decided nursing was something she'd like to do.

So she went to the former Hamilton College in Omaha to become a Licensed Practical Nurse. She was LPN for 14 years.

Porter worked as a CNA and then an LPN at Hooper Care

Center. She then worked as an LPN at the former Arbor Manor in Fremont for three years and the former Birchwood Manor in North Bend for seven years.

She then worked at Nye Legacy in Fremont.

In the spring of 2018, she began taking classes to become a registered nurse.

Porter worked fulltime at Nye Legacy while going back to school and raising three sons, Peirson, 12, Ashton, 10, and Zachary, 5. Her fiancé is Jarrod Steenblock.

"I was very busy," she said, adding that she's appreciated her family's support.

Porter graduated in March 2020 and started working at Methodist Fremont Health.

That same month, the hospital admitted its first COVID-19 patient as the pandemic swept

across the nation.

"It was kind of a whirlwind," Porter said. "Everyone was so busy at the hospital that you just dove in and did what you could do to be a part of the team and help out."

Porter believes her previous experiences helped prepare her for this time.

She already had nursing skills such as working with catheters and IVs.

"It was really just learning my role as an RN and, acute care, which was difficult," she said.

She's seen many sad situations in the last year.

"Families have been very distraught this year," Porter said. "It's already hard having your mom or your dad in the hospital and you kind of feel out of control, but now you can't even be there which makes it even harder."

Time passed and patients were able to have one visitor a day.

As a nurse, Porter said she tries to be as attentive as possible to the patient and also communicate as often as possible with families via phone or Facetime.

She's never used technology as much as she has during the last year.

Looking back, she recalls a man who was in the ICU for a long time.

"His wife could come up every day," Porter remembered.

After he was discharged, Porter often wondered how the man was doing.

"You put so much time and effort and skill and blood, sweat and tears into this man getting well and I found out that he went home and is doing great," she said. "He's my miracle this year."

Porter enjoys interacting with others.

"I love being around people," she said. "I love helping people. I can help people in their darkest day, their happiest moment, their scariest time. I get to be their saving grace or their light or their rock."

How does one do that?

"It's emotionally exhausting for sure, but you just have to go in every day, knowing that you're making a difference," she said.

Porter admits the work is hard and some days are mentally taxing.

"But the good days help you forget about the bad days," she said. "It's so incredibly rewarding. You could see a patient from five years ago out on the street and they remember you. You made an impact on someone's life."

The young woman who took CNA classes years ago found her calling.

"I've often said I cannot picture myself doing anything else," Porter said. "I feel like that was what I was meant to do."

Medical setbacks fuel passion for nursing career

CAITLIN HEANEY WEST

The Times-Tribune (Scranton, Pa.)

Madison Jarocha knows her life would look much different if illness had not touched her.

From an autoimmune disease that shook up her world as a teenager to broken bones to a cancer diagnosis in her final year of college, the 21-year-old has faced — and survived — more than some people do in a lifetime.

Madison, of South Abington Twp., Pennsylvania, is studying for a nursing degree from University of Central Florida. As a student in Abington Heights School District, however, Madison thought she'd one day study mathematics. That, along with much more of her life, changed when she was 16.

A basketball and field hockey player, Madison initially thought she was having issues with asthma when she started getting out of breath and passing out at practice. When her mother, Nicole Jarocha, saw Madison for the first time in a few weeks, her intuition kicked in.

"She walked into the house, (and) I turned to my sister and said, 'There's something wrong with her,'" Nicole Jarocha recalled.

Madison, who lost about 20 pounds over two months and felt seriously fatigued, had seen doctors for a few months, but nothing came of the appointments. Her mother pushed for bloodwork and other tests, and Madison ended up getting admitted to Geisinger Medical Center in Danville, Pennsylvania.

"I had to stop everything," Madison recalled. "I can't walk up a flight of stairs without getting out of breath."

Madison learned she has acute systemic scleroderma. The more common variety causes the skin to produce too much collagen, but in Madison's case, her body produces too much collagen internally, which the body thinks of as foreign and then starts attacking her muscles, tissues and organs.

Overall, the disease led to at least 10 hospitalizations, several surgeries and

procedures, numerous trips to Baltimore and the possibility of needing a double lung transplant one day.

"The nurses that I had, I feel like I definitely would not be where I was without them," Madison said. "I kind of want to do for other people what they did with me."

Switching paths

Madison realized going into her senior year at Abington Heights that nursing was the career for her. Ready for a fresh start, she headed to Florida and plans to graduate this May with a nursing degree. She's had research published, made dean's list each semester and was picked to participate in a research study.

Madison expects to stay in Florida for another year after college before hitting the road to work as a travel nurse. She's considering a career in bone-marrow transplants or oncology, having done clinical work in an adult oncology clinic last year that showed her how much she enjoys caring for patients in a critical setting. Eventually, she'd like to move into nurse education.

"There's a lot you can do with nursing after school and everything," Madison said. Early in college, while raising money for the Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children through the Knight-Thon, she collapsed and was taken to that very hospital for treatment. She went blind for more than a month, her mother said, as doctors suggested that flareups from Madison's disorder could have affected the connective tissues in the eyes. While Madison regained her eyesight, she is legally blind without her glasses.

Then last year, Madison was riding on the back of a moped with a friend when the vehicle crashed into a pole at 55 mph. Thrown more than 20 feet but miraculously alive, Madison had a concussion and broke several bones in her foot.

Still, she pushed forward through her

recovery, and then another setback came: cancer.

In June, she noticed a lump on top of her rib cage but thought it was just a cyst, which she gets often. By October, however, she realized it had almost doubled or tripled in size. Doctors diagnosed her with leiomyosarcoma, a cancer of the connective tissues and muscles.

Madison underwent surgery on Nov. 30, during which doctors removed the affected area and tissue surrounding it. Subsequent testing showed she was clear of cancer and did not need chemotherapy. She said she feels a lot better with the cancer behind her.

"I got really lucky," Madison said.

Showing strength

Both Madison and her mother see how much she has taken away from these experiences, especially when it comes to nursing.

"I know what it's like to be a patient in the hospital," Madison said. "I've had some good nurses and bad nurses. And I kind of know how I want to be treated in a hospital. ... I'll be able to sympathize and also empathize with my patients and know what situation they're in."

"She's going to be the nurse that everyone wants," Nicole Jarocha said. "I think first and foremost,

as a nurse, the empathy and compassion is like 90% of the medicine. I just don't think empathy can be taught or compassion can be taught; you either have it or you don't. ... I just think that her empathy and compassion is going to have a lot to do with the helping of her patients."

Madison just tried to focus on getting through whatever she faced at that moment, knowing it would soon pass. And believes everything happens for a reason. Trials can make her a stronger person or give her more insight into her career.

"I just realized how resilient I was," Madison said. "I have a really good perspective on life. No matter what happens, I just try to keep a positive attitude."



PHOTO BY KAROLINA GRABOWSKA FROM PEXELS



Heritage at Shalimar Gardens Director of Healthcare Sandy Renner, right, stands with her husband, Brad.



COURTESY PHOTOS

Heritage at Shalimar Gardens Director of Healthcare Sandy Renner, right, stands with her two daughters, Molly, far left, and Maddy.

Sandy Renner appreciates educating, leading nurses at Heritage at Shalimar Gardens

COLLIN SPILINEK
Fremont Tribune

As education for nurses is one of her roles at the Heritage at Shalimar Gardens, Sandy Renner said the COVID-19 pandemic had instructions changing daily for her and her team.

"It was always constantly changing, and that made everybody second guess themselves," she said. "So that was the biggest thing at the beginning, was just providing them with the tools, the education, the training and reassurance."

For more than six years, Renner has worked as director of healthcare for the Fremont assisted living facility, where she leads the nursing department and staff.

Renner has 25 years of experience as a nurse, and said her interest in the field developed while attending the College of Saint Mary in Omaha.

"I just found that nursing seemed to be very diverse, with a lot of different options to care for people in different spectrums," she said.

After graduation, Renner



worked as a charge nurse in geriatrics at a skilled facility, where she said she would get to form bonds with her patients.

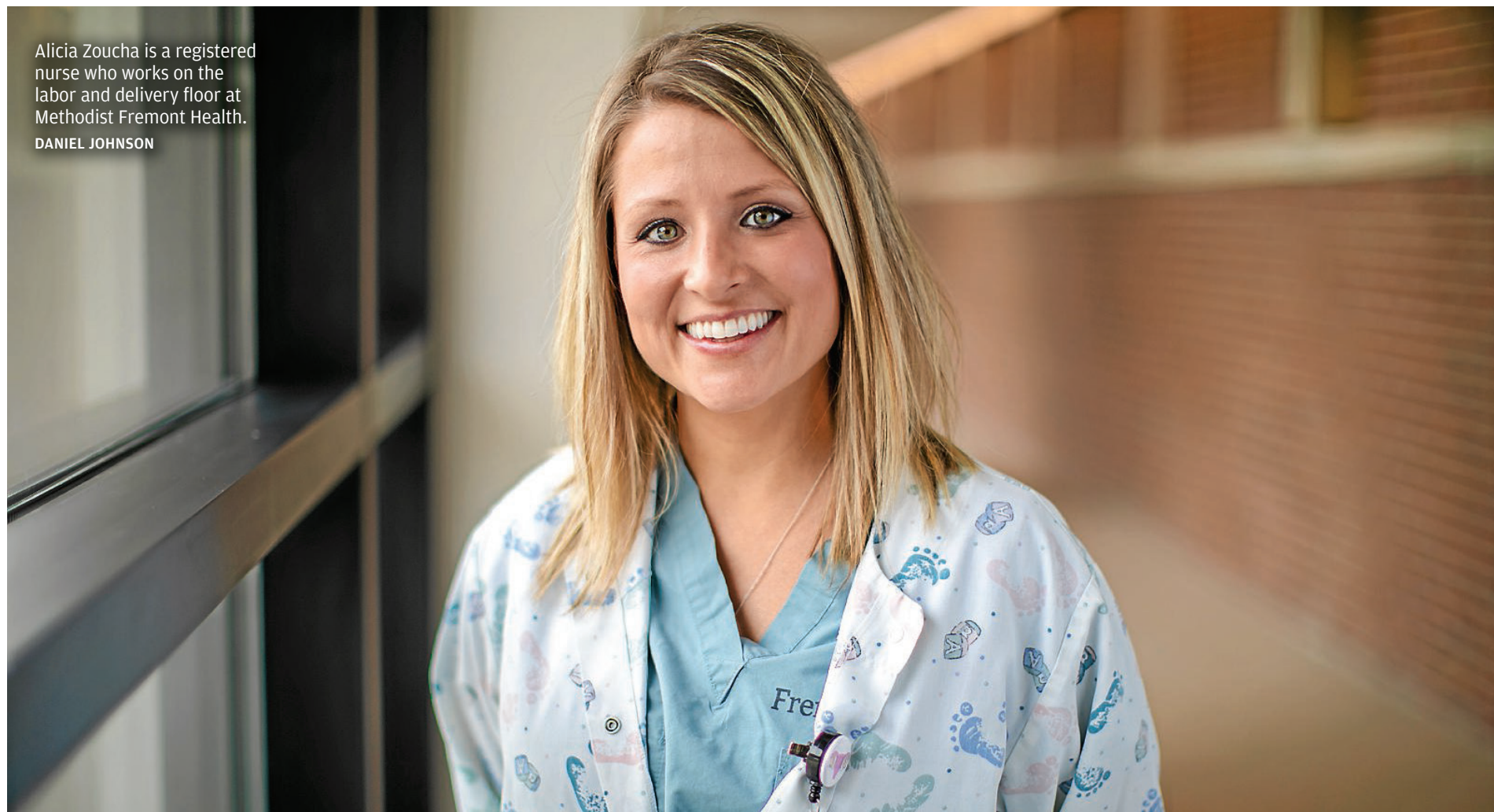
"Some of them were able to go back home, and some were at end-of-life," she said. "So it was just making that bond with them and making sure they had what they needed to be comfortable."

Over the years, Renner moved up to work as assistant director of healthcare and director of healthcare at the facility.

Please see **RENNER**, Page 15

Alicia Zoucha is a registered nurse who works on the labor and delivery floor at Methodist Fremont Health.

DANIEL JOHNSON



A CALL TO SERVICE

Nurse talks about good, sad memories caring for patients

TAMMY REAL-MCKEIGHAN
News Editor

Alicia Zoucha quotes Mahatma Gandhi when she talks about her role as a nurse:

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

If that's the case, then it sounds like Zoucha has found herself.

"That's why I do nursing," said Zoucha, a registered nurse

at Methodist Fremont Health. "That fills my bucket. That makes me complete and that makes me whole along with the mother and wife role."

Zoucha is a registered nurse who works on the labor and delivery floor of the hospital.

During her career, Zoucha has worked on both ends of the life spectrum. She's cared for elderly people and moms with newborns.

She knows the skills nurses need and the importance of being a patient advocate.

Her work has been noticed.

Zoucha is among local nurses nominated by a community member and who then received enough

readers' votes to be featured in a story as part of National Nurses Week.

She and other nurses are being honored for going above and beyond and putting others first.

Zoucha comes from a family of nurses. Her mom, Carolyn Leahy, is a retired nurse.

"I would always see my mom getting ready for work in the morning, putting on her nursing scrubs and the stethoscope she had; that piqued my interest," Zoucha said. "As a child, I always said I was going to be a nurse. I dressed up for a nurse as Halloween one year."

A 2006 Bergen High School

graduate, Zoucha became a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA). She went to Iowa Western Community College in Council Bluffs, to become a licensed practical nurse.

She worked in long-term care at Nye Legacy and the former Arbor Manor. She continued her education, became a registered nurse and began working at Methodist Fremont Health. She'd earn an associate's degree in nursing in 2015 and bachelor's degree in 2018.

Having seen end-of-life and birth in her occupation, Zoucha said the most difficult part of her job occurs when an infant doesn't survive.

"In long-term care, they've

generally lived a long, happy life, but babies are a different story," she said.

She knows what it is to comfort a family during a time of loss.

"Every day I go to work and I ask myself, 'Who does this person need me to be in this moment?'" she said. "There's a lot of internal dialogue that goes on."

"Nursing as a career, in general, I think takes a lot of reading non-verbal communication. That is such a huge part of how you can relate to your patients, establish a relationship to your patients, how you can comfort your patients

Please see **ZOUCHA**, Page 15

Patty Richards thankful for patients, staff as nurse at Nye Legacy

COLLIN SPILINEK
Fremont Tribune

When it comes to being a nurse, Patty Richards said it's all about finding a good balance between work and life.

"That is unfortunately something that most nurses aren't very good at," she said. "So we definitely all need to try and help each other find that balance, be there to support each other and be supportive of your coworkers."

For the last four years, Richards has worked as a daytime charge nurse at Nye Legacy in Fremont. Born and raised in Omaha, she attended university at the College of Saint Mary.

"From a little kid, I always wanted to be a nurse because I loved taking care of people," she said. "But real life hit, and I took the scenic route to being a nurse and went back to school after my kids were born."

After graduation, Richards worked as a tech in the intensive care unit at the University of Nebraska Medical Center before transitioning into the unit.

Upon working in the UCU, Richards said she learned she was not an adrenaline junky, as the work there was fast-paced.

"It's pretty intense, and toward the end of my time there, I found myself taking more of the patients that probably weren't going to make it out of the ICU and were probably closer to the end of their lives," she said. "Which then that transitioned me into being a hospice nurse."

Richards said while working in hospice, she helped her patients make sure they had everything they needed up until the very end.

"If there was something special they wanted to do at the end



COURTESY

Patty Richards, a daytime charge nurse at Nye Legacy, has had experience working in intensive care and hospice prior to joining the team in 2017.

"You can see the heart that people have in the nursing profession. You can just see it in the way that they interact with their patients or their families or with each other. It takes special people to do what we do."

Patty Richards

of their life, we always tried to facilitate that, whatever it might be," she said. "And being able to walk that path with their family and the patient, I truly loved that part of it."

In the summer of 2017, Rich-

ards decided to take a position as a nurse at Nye Legacy at the recommendation of several friends who worked there.

"This was a perfect fit for me," she said. "I'm kind of in the middle between the hospital and long-

term care, because I work in the acute rehab portion, and so it just seemed to be a good fit and a starting point in my life."

At Nye, Richards oversees certified nursing assistants and medication aides and conducts full cares on patients, including taking care of their wounds and making sure they feel comfortable.

"On a daily basis, I'm making sure that everything is status quo for them while they're here," she said. "And we're starting to get them to the point where they're going to be able to go back home, working with the physical therapists and everything to get these patients back on their feet."

In her position, Richards said she gets to be a mentor as she orientates new staff and nursing students, as well as educates her patients.

"I really enjoy the education portion of it, trying to educate patients and their families in the disease process and cares provided and how to keep people comfortable," she said. "I just truly enjoy taking care of people."

Richards was one of the first nurses to open up Nye Legacy's COVID-19 unit during the onset of the pandemic last year.

"We did for almost that whole 11 months, it was N95s and face shields and gowns and gloves and everything nonstop," she said. "And we were just seeing people that were really, really sick that came into our COVID unit."

Witnessing the pandemic's effects on her staff firsthand, Richards

said it's caused much stress and exhaustion in the healthcare field.

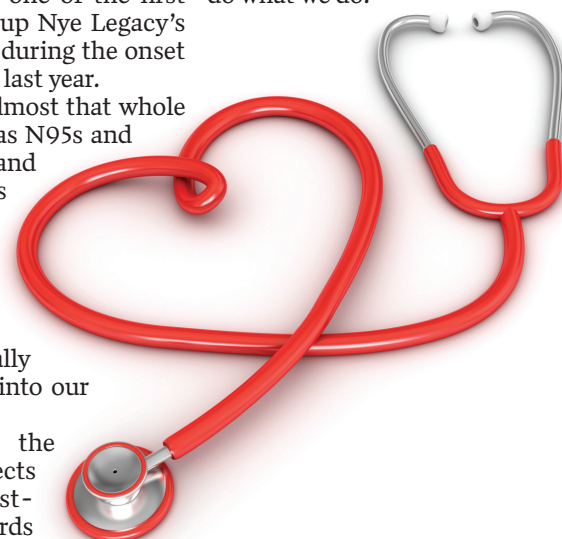
"It's just worn on people, just knowing that you could be the next one to get it, or if you had it and were a carrier and weren't having any symptoms, God forbid you gave it to somebody," she said. "It's just that constant stress of that, it's pretty daunting."

Although the job requires dealing with a multitude of personalities from patients, Richards said she's always grateful for the appreciation shown by them.

"If you're good at what you do, you can kind of read your people and know kind of what that person is going to require to get them to the point where they can make it back out of here or get better if they were in the hospital," she said.

More than anything, Richards said she can't imagine doing anything else.

"You can see the heart that people have in the nursing profession. You can just see it in the way that they interact with their patients or their families or with each other," she said. "It takes special people to do what we do."





Lois Krohn working at her desk at Fremont Middle School.

NOAH JOHNSON PHOTOS,
FREMONT TRIBUNE

DEVELOPING A BLUEPRINT

Krohn reflects on impact of school nurses during a pandemic

NOAH JOHNSON
Fremont Tribune

Fremont Public Schools needed a wealth of nursing experience to prepare for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Luckily, the school district had 39 years worth of nursing experience in Lois Krohn, along with a team of dedicated nurses, to help formulate and execute its blueprint to safely bring students back to the classroom.

Krohn was one of several area nurses nominated by the Fremont community as one of the top nurses in the area. She then received enough votes from the Fremont Tribune's readers to receive the recognition.

Krohn is the program coordinator for nurses at FPS. When the school district learned about the first exposure of the

coronavirus in Fremont, Krohn said she met with administration to begin developing a blueprint to address the pandemic.

"I worked with Three Rivers Public Health Department and pulled up different things from the Center for Disease Control, the Department of Education, the National Association of School Nursing," she said. "We kind of combined all of that together to come up with a blueprint with all the different areas within the public school system."

The year has been a challenging one, primarily due to the unknowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, Krohn said. However, she said FPS administration have helped nurses throughout the district execute the blueprint.

"We've been given great guidelines by Three Rivers and we follow those guidelines and parents have been, for the most part, really good to work with and have been understanding that we're just doing our job," Krohn said.

Krohn's 39-year career was based on a single goal; making a difference in someone's life.

She always had a passion for pediatric care, which led to a four-year stay in Kansas City as a nurse in the pediatric intensive care unit. She then worked at Methodist Fremont Health for 20 years before becoming a school nurse at FPS.

"Being a school nurse was kind of my passion," she said. "I always wanted to do that."

Please see **KROHN**, Page 15



Lois Krohn has working in nursing for the last 39 years, 15 of which have been spent at Fremont Public Schools

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A PASSION TO SERVE

Ruiz reflects on nursing recognition

NOAH JOHNSON
Fremont Tribune

Brittney Ruiz has always had a passion for serving others.

The registered nurse at Methodist Fremont Health said she never had any intention of staying in the city after she completed high school, but was drawn to Midland University after receiving a scholarship.

From there, she quickly found her calling in nursing and has made it a career ever since.

Ruiz was one of several area nurses nominated by the Fremont community as one of the top nurses in the area. She then received enough votes from the Fremont Tribune's readers to receive the recognition.

While attending Midland University from 2011 to 2015, Ruiz met her husband. In her junior year, she gave birth to her first child. That same year, Ruiz began her obstetrics rotation and quickly found her passion.

"I was just really, really drawn to OB in nursing," she said. "I only got to see a couple babies being born, but I just remember leaving clinicals super excited and giddy."

After completing the rotation, Ruiz said she knew she wanted to pursue a career where she could bring life into the world. So, Ruiz began an obstetrics preceptorship at Methodist Fremont Health and quickly found that she had made the right choice.

"I just loved it," she said. "I love the atmosphere and I love the co-workers. They were so inclusive. It felt like family."

That experience gave her the confidence to apply for a full-time position as a registered nurse at the hospital in 2015.

"I really feel like it was God's

Brittney Ruiz is a registered nurse at Methodist Fremont Health.

DANIEL JOHNSON



plan for my life that I work in Fremont and I've been there ever since," she said.

Over the last six years, Ruiz said she has constantly been learning. New medical practices and constantly changing policies are a stressful part of the job, but Ruiz said the work leads toward the best possible care for the hospital's patients.

"We're just improving our care in all these different ways," she said. "I'm always learning and seeing new things."

Over the last year, adjusting to change has been vital for Ruiz's line of work. While she said her work wasn't as demanding as a nurse working in the ICU or battling COVID-19 on the frontlines,

Ruiz said the job was stressful.

"It's just a really scary time for us," she said. "We're trying to protect ourselves and also are trying to be there for our patients and give them the best possible care."

Now that the majority of the hospital's nursing staff is fully vaccinated, Ruiz said those fears have diminished somewhat.

"There was a lot of fear of taking it home to our families or fears of what would happen if a newborn baby gets it," she said. "We had to make a lot of accommodations with our C-sections and just things like that. The workflow definitely changed."

Through all the stress and fear, Ruiz said her job was able to pro-

vide some measure of good to families as they bring their children into the world.

"It is that little bit of light and that little bit of hope that we have opportunity to witness it," she said. "I've always viewed the job as a blessing and a privilege to be with these parents."

To be recognized as a top area nurse is a privilege to Ruiz. She said she enters work every day with a strong passion to serve her patients.

"I go to work every single day and I am happy to be there," she said. "I love my coworkers. They're family to me and I'm so happy. God has brought me here and I just feel honored."

Ruiz said the reason she is able

to do her job is because she "genuinely loves it."

"I genuinely love serving these women and these families," she said. "I think it comes across in my demeanor."

Ruiz said her work is just one example of a strong team at Methodist Fremont Health. She said everybody at Methodist Fremont Health, including management, has stepped up over the last year to provide quality care to its patients.

"I feel like we've all been there for each other and supported each other through this year and it's just really exciting," she said. "We're all strong and everybody does a good job. It's just exciting to watch everybody grow."

Renner

From 10

“That just allowed me to work more with community and family versus being a charge nurse, you work basically for the resident,” she said. “But having that management role, you can work with their families and community.”

In taking the leadership position, Renner said like many roles in healthcare, it didn’t come easy at first.

“Even today, you have your good days and your bad days,” she said. “But I would say I felt pretty comfortable because I was in the nursing role for a good amount of time.”

Renner moved from Omaha to Linwood with her husband, Brad, where they live today. The two have two daughters and two grandchildren.

Around six years ago, Renner decided to take the director position at Heritage.

“I was looking just for a change because I was at my other position for over eight years,” she said. “Before, I was in a skilled community, and this was assisted living, so it was a different challenge.”

In her role, Renner works with residents, families and physicians to make sure they’re getting the care they need along with her work in education of the nursing staff.

“We update education minimally every year for some things, so it could be for new staff or established staff. It’s just so they are competent in providing care to our residents, and education is kind of ongoing, all the time.”

Sandy Renner

“We update education minimally every year for some things, so it could be for new staff or established staff,” she said. “It’s just so they are competent in providing care to our residents, and education is kind of ongoing, all the time.”

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, Renner said she took on a new role with her education

training.

“The unknown brings fear, so it was constant training with personal protective equipment and the reassurance that, ‘You have the confidence, you can do this,’” she said. “And with kind of the mental health of it, having them wrap their heads around it that we can get through this.”

But over the last 14 months, Renner said she couldn’t be more

proud of her staff.

“I think we’ve done an awesome, awesome job here taking care of the residents during the whole pandemic, keeping them healthy and safe here in the environment,” she said.

At Heritage, Renner said she’s been able to form long-last relationships with not only the residents and their families, but the nurses on her staff as well.

“Being a nurse means understanding and compassion and looking at the whole resident, meaning physical and mental health, especially during this pandemic,” she said. “They put everyone else in front of them and make sure everybody else gets everything they need.”

Zoucha

From 11

when they’re experiencing loss, how you establish that trust in that relationship.”

Nurses transition from one role to another.

“One minute we’re meeting basic patient needs and the next minute we’re finding resources in the community for the patient, because we recognize that this patient doesn’t have diapers for their baby or could use this or that resource,” she said.

Zoucha has appreciated her family’s support, including her husband, Jordan.

“He enhances my ability to be the best nurse I can be,” she said.

“Without his support, I couldn’t imagine doing the job I do and succeeding.”

The Zouchas have a daughter, Coralyn, 5, and a son, Brooks, 2.

“They’re my favorite littles,” she said.

Zoucha soon will have worked on the labor and delivery floor for six years.

In 2020, Zoucha saw how COVID affected every aspect of nursing care. If there were available staff in labor and delivery, these nurses would help answer patient call lights, help patients to the bathroom or get supplies for frontline nurses caring for COVID patients.

There were some COVID-positive moms.

“We kept in close contact with Dr. Sukstorf (infectious disease

“If you’re a patient in my care, my outlook is – I’m going to take the best care of you that I can. I give 110 percent every single day I walk on that floor.”

Alicia Zoucha

specialist at Methodist Fremont) and with our physicians,” Zoucha said. “We had good outcomes at Fremont with our patient population in OB that were affected.”

Looking back on her career, Zoucha again recalls sad and happy times.

“Some of the most challenging and difficult experiences in my nursing career has to do with the loss of a baby,” she said.

She doesn’t forget those moments.

“That part of nursing is so challenging,” she said. “It’s tough to leave your work at work and then you come home and you have to transition back to into the mom-wife role. My husband knows. He doesn’t ask questions. I can’t talk about that. But that’s the hardest part of nursing is transitioning back into that role when you’ve had stuff go on in your day. It will play out in your head a million times and, years down the road, it will play out again.”

At the same time, she appreciates the team effort of doctors and nurses in helping patients and God’s direction in navigating such heart-wrenching times.

“Ultimately, if I have a bad situation the first person I thank is God for his guidance in that situation, every single time,” she said.

She thanks God in the good times, too, like when a mom, who didn’t have success in breastfeeding her first child, is able to do so with her second — and is on “Cloud 9.”

By far, Zoucha sees more positive than negative outcomes and adds something else:

“If you’re a patient in my care, my outlook is – I’m going to take the best care of you that I can,” she said. “I give 110 percent every single day I walk on that floor.”

Krohn

From 13

Krohn said this year was precipitated by months of preparation and hard work among nurses and school administration. She said the collaboration among her peers made the task easier.

“I think what has been the biggest help is that it wasn’t just my job to do stuff,” she said. “Everybody said: ‘How can we help?’ Everybody kind of pitched in from all different areas and we

were able to plow through it all.”

In the end, Krohn said she felt FPS did a “wonderful” job in executing its plan for the 2020/21 school year.

“Most of the COVID-19 cases that we did see were not contracted within the schools,” she said. “It was outside of schools or through family members.”

Schools were also able to maintain mask usage among students throughout the year along with other guidelines, such as social distancing.

“The kids were very good at

“To know that people are recognizing the profession and the people that are in the profession and the work that we truly do, even though we’re not in it for the recognition, is nice to know.”

Lois Krohn

following that, so it was very rewarding to say that we were able to do this,” she said. “If you follow the guidelines, then it does work.”

With a year of hard work under their belts, Krohn said nurses

and school staff alike are looking forward to a well-earned summer.

“We’re all ready for a break,” she said. “It’s been a tough year emotionally and physically, but it’s good to know that we were

able to do it. We’ve accomplished something that many larger schools and places throughout the country haven’t been able to do or haven’t even ventured into trying.”

As for the award, Krohn said being recognized as a top nurse in the area is “humbling.”

“To know that people are recognizing the profession and the people that are in the profession and the work that we truly do, even though we’re not in it for the recognition, is nice to know.”



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