



Nursing from the heart

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Mom shares lifetime of wisdom in daughter's book

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Mr. Goldberg may have been a difficult nursing home patient back in the early '70s, but he also was tenderly remembered by a particular nurse.

Registered Nurse Martha Smith tells the story of their meeting in "Treasures of a Nurse's Heart" (iUniverse, \$14.95), a newly released memoir of highlights from her 50-year nursing career.

When nursing assistants tried to take Mr. Goldberg to the shower, he fought them. He would not allow them to change his clothes, and he hid food in his room, which was against the rules. So difficult was he that the staff sought out Smith one October morning to complain.

Putting down her reports, Smith went to Mr. Goldberg's room and asked everyone to leave her alone with him. He was shaking and afraid as she sat next to him, held his hand, rubbed his arm. As she did the sleeve to his pajama shirt rolled up:

Tears came to my eyes as they focused on the horrifying tattoo that signified Mr. Goldberg had been a Jewish prisoner in Auschwitz during the war. ... Everything suddenly made sense to me. His fear of taking off his clothes, his terror of the shower, and his hoarding food in his room were all reminiscent of the atrocities committed during the war.

The vignette about Mr. Goldberg, called "Surviving the Unthinkable," is one of 20 heartfelt real-life stories set to words by Smith's daughter -- Hackettstown author Lisa Smith Wagner. At the beginning of each chapter Wagner writes a stage-setting epigraph and at the end she lists the life lessons her mother gleaned from her experiences.

After the story of Mr. Goldberg, Wagner writes: Try to take the time to understand from where a person's behavior is coming. This will help you deal with him or her much more effectively.

Following those quiet moments with her patient, Smith worked with her staff to create a "very special plan of care" for Mr. Goldberg, one that allowed him to have food in his room in state-approved containers. From that point forward, he was bathed and his clothes changed in the privacy of his room.

In his final days, he grew to be happy at the home.

Book with a mission

The slim volume of stories about nursing never once mentions a medicine, or a medical machine. It is wholly about people -- the heart of nursing, in Smith's view. In 2004 she retired from her beloved geriatrics as director of nursing at South Tampa Health & Rehabilitation Center. At her daughter's prompting, she told her stories to inspire a new generation of people to enter the field she loves at a time when nursing itself is ailing.

If trends continue as they are presently, the United States will experience a 20 percent shortage of nurses by 2020, according to an oft-cited study by Dr. Peter Buerhaus published in the Journal of the American Medical Association in 2000.

"When I was a young nurse, we all had a lot of time to spend with our patients," Smith said in an interview from her Florida home. "We did a lot of hands-on nursing, which I loved. But today because we are such a litigious society, the paperwork that's involved with being a nurse makes it difficult to have the time. You have to document everything that you do. There is a lot of charting, and it's very difficult to get in everything."

"But there is always time, no matter how busy you are, to touch someone. If you're passing your medications, you can do it with a smile. Nurses can still make a difference in people's lives."

"Surviving the Unthinkable," she said, epitomizes nursing in its finest moments when a nursing team can not only help a patient physically but teach his very soul to recover and learn to trust again.

Last week the Johnson & Johnson Campaign for Nursing's Future endorsed "Treasures of a Nurse's Heart" and posted it online atop its list of Nursing Resources "to aid and inspire nurses of all ages." The campaign works with professional nursing organizations, schools and hospitals to enhance the image of nursing, retain veteran nurses and attract new ones, according to Kristen Wallace, J&J spokeswoman.

If any nurse is equipped for such a large and important task, it is Martha Smith, according to Mary Curley, a licensed nursing home administrator and Smith's last boss in South Tampa. Curley describes Smith as "an old-fashioned nurse with a big heart" and a woman with a knack for seeing through the routine and into the depth of people and situations.

"You walked into her office and there was a candy jar and chairs with frilly pillows," she recalled. "You'd leave with help for any problem you had -- and a candy bar. She is a classic. To me, she is the Norman Rockwell version of what a nurse should be."

Not just for nurses

Wagner's presentation of the stories was designed to make them entertaining and applicable not only to nurses but to anyone who grapples with the big issues of life at the center of the stories.

"Frank" deals with the loneliness and post-traumatic stress disorder of a World War II veteran, "The Child Within" with an adult man's coming to grips with his childhood before his mother's death, "The Bells" with a nun who left Smith a special necklace, and "A Hamburger, Fries, and a Chocolate Milkshake, Please!" with taking one's destiny in one's own hands.

"I didn't want only nurses to read the book," said Wagner, 44. "I wanted everyday people to see what my mother took from nursing. As a child I didn't have a lot of opportunity to watch my mom as a nurse, but I watched her every day as a woman and a mother.

"It didn't matter whether she had her nurse's cap on, or her neighbor hat, or her stranger-on-the-street hat. She took whatever lessons she learned from being a nurse into her everyday life. The point is, you don't have to be a nurse to change the life of someone like Mr. Goldberg. We can all hold each other's hands."

There is yet another dimension to "Treasures of a Nurse's Heart," stemming from how it was created. It was natural for Smith to turn to Wagner for help in creating the perfect poem for her last Nurse's Day ceremony before her retirement, especially since Wagner owns and runs a local inspirational poetry business, Hearts and Hands Forever.

The result: "Treasures of a Nurse's Heart," the poem at the beginning of the book.

"It never dawned on me to ask my mother what her treasures of the heart were until after the poem was read," Wagner said. "We were at my grandmother's house on Long Island and I asked my mother to tell me some of her treasures. I sat there, mesmerized."

During one year of talking and e-mailing, writing and rewriting, their conversation blossomed into a manuscript. The back and forth was reward in itself, both mother and daughter say. Smith never realized the depth of her daughter's creativity or talent.

Said Smith, "During our working, my daughter got to know who Martha is. She always knew who Mommy was, but she got to know another part of me. It was a joyful experience."

The sentiment reflects a key theme in the story collection, which Smith and Wagner drive home in the epilogue.

The person you become

"You cannot separate the person you are from the professional you become," Smith said. She told younger nurses on her staff that when they walked through the doors to work, they brought their whole beings with them, not just their professional selves.

"Your being is a combination of things -- your beliefs, how you feel about people, your experiences in life," she said.

Certainly Smith brought her whole being to the pediatric ward on the midnight-to-8 a.m. shift early in her career. She described how she tended to Anna, a 5-year-old with leukemia, in the story "God's Little Angel." Anna reached for her because she wanted to be rocked to sleep.

Smith settled into a rocking chair, holding Anna as well as the little girl's blanket and teddy bear. After a night of studying and a day of work, even Smith closed her eyes and dozed. When she awoke, she discovered Anna had died in her arms:

No words can describe the emotions I felt at that moment. I was so incredibly and profoundly affected by the death of this precious child that I could not continue with my assigned duties. ... My head nurse, a very compassionate woman, quietly suggested that I go back to my dorm room and think about whether I should continue in the field of nursing. She told me that dealing with difficult situations was part of being a nurse.

Smith thought and thought, her resolve alternately wavering and strengthening, until she realized she had helped Anna die without fear. If she could go on after Anna's death, she reasoned, nothing would ever stand in the way of her being a nurse. She reported back to work. For decades.

And so it can be said that the night that child died was the night this nurse was born.