

How to Find Your Niche IN NURSING

Somewhere there's a job perfectly suited to your talents and temperament

By Dan Harvey

How does a former firefighter wind up as a flight nurse, tending to patients on a medical helicopter as it races to a hospital rooftop?

He finds his niche in the nursing field: that perfect job ideally suited to his talents and temperament.

There's a niche for everyone, and some are lucky enough find it right away. Others are delayed by detours into not-quite-right jobs. And some struggle for years to figure out which niche will finally offer the career fulfillment that has eluded them too long.

Firefighter-turned-nurse Daniel Kramer is a flight crew member on the Temple University Health System Transport Team, which includes both ground and air critical care transport. Like most other nurses on the team, his desire to study nursing grew out of his experience in other fast-paced, high-pressure helping professions. Coincidentally (or maybe not),

Kramer and three other nurses on his team all were firefighters, EMTs and paramedics earlier in their careers.

The team's business development representative, Joyce Foresman-Capuzzi, says these team members "felt a 'fire-in-the-belly' that flared up as they progressed through their careers, and it ultimately led them to their positions today."

Their burning desire wasn't to be any kind of nurse in any setting, it was to be a special kind of nurse in a very specific setting.

"Professionals on this team wanted to move forward in their careers while maintaining the same high level of autonomy, decision-making responsibility and hands-on caregiving that they experienced in their previous jobs," Foresman-Capuzzi says.

Their job satisfaction is sky-high because they figured out the type of job that would be most rewarding for them personally and professionally. That may sound easy, but for many nurses finding a career direction is an ongoing challenge, discouraging and at times overwhelming.

If you are among the directionally challenged, the good news is that many people who once felt as you do and later found that perfect niche are ready and willing to offer their encouragement and example.

Establishing the Foundation

Foresman-Capuzzi discovered her own niche through an evolutionary process of self-examination and career exploration. She amassed an enormous amount of experience and education, earning numerous accreditations: BSN, RN, CEN, CPN, CTRN and EMT-P.

With so many interests and capabilities, it eventually became clear to her that she would be happiest in a multi-faceted job with diverse and evolving responsibilities. Elements of her current job description include education, clinical care, marketing and customer service.

"Each day, it seems that something new is added," Foresman-Capuzzi says. And she wouldn't have it any other way. "It makes my life extremely interesting."

She is happy to offer others inspiration and advice from her own journey down the path to the perfect niche.

To start, she was not that serenely focused person sitting next to you in school who, from the outset, possessed a solid vision of her career path. (Such people are the exception, by the way.)

However, she does advise young people to start as early as possible to establish the foundation for a satisfying career.

First and foremost, she says, you must ask yourself if you have a passion for nursing — that "fire in the belly" as Foresman-Capuzzi likes to call it. Without it, she feels, you won't be truly happy in any nursing job.

"Nursing requires that kind of fervor," she says. "If you don't have the fire, and you're more focused on job elements, such as work schedule and salary, then you'll most likely never find your niche. Healthcare is more than just a job; it's a profession, in the truest sense of that word."

The happiest nurses appreciate both the art and science of the profession. "The art involves delivering compassionate care, and the science involves embracing evidence-based knowledge on how the body works," explains Foresman-Capuzzi.

If you have the passion, you have the foundation. From that point on you need to follow your instincts, trusting your gut and persevering when you need to make a choice or get around unforeseen roadblocks.



Paola Noguera

Joyce Foresman-Capuzzi,
BSN, RN, CEN, CPN,
CTRN, EMT-P



David Gehosky

Most members of the Temple University Health System Transport Team were EMTs, paramedics, firefighters or some combination thereof before they found their niche in nursing. *Front right* Stephen Teitelman, BS, RN, NREMT-P, CCRN, CEN, CFRN, CTRN, FP-C, is on the ground critical care transport team. Airborne members of the team include *front left* Norman Krobath, BS, NREMT-P, FP-C, and *beside helicopter, left to right* Daniel Kramer, RN, PHRN, CEN; Ryan Myers, PHRN, CCRN, CEN, CFRN; and Christopher Ritter, BS, RN, NREMT-P, CCRN-CMC, CFRN, FP-C.

Lynn Ferchau, RN, MSN, CCRN-CSN, APN.C, had the passion and harnessed it when the going got tough. Now a clinical nurse specialist in the ICU and CCU at Cooper University Hospital in Camden, N.J., she recalls, "I wanted to go into critical care. At first, I had a rather difficult time, but I persisted in my chosen direction because I realized it was something I truly wanted. I worked hard and learned as much as I could. Ultimately, I became a very good bedside nurse."

Ongoing Education

Ferchau's advice for nurses who haven't found their niche is to take advantage of any and all opportunities for exposure to various jobs.

"You need to see as many areas as you can, to help you decide if there's something that particularly piques your interest," she says. "There are numerous clinical experiences available in school," such as "observing in clinics and emergency rooms, or spending time in a homecare setting, or working on different floors in a facility, such as med surg, intensive care and oncology."

Foresman-Capuzzi says once you decide on an area of interest, you should strive to advance your level of expertise. "You need to read the journals, take subspecialty examinations, and participate in groups and professional organizations."

Ferchau agrees: "Do the extra homework it takes to stay on top of a specialty and healthcare in general, nursing in particular. Healthcare is an ever-changing field, so you never stop learning. Sometimes, you just can't go home, sit down on a couch or chair and say, 'I really don't feel like reading tonight.'"

Volunteer Work

Another way to find your personal niche is through experiences in a non-paying or low-paying work arrangement, such as volunteering or part-time employment.

"Never underestimate the value that volunteering can provide in career direction," says Foresman-Capuzzi. "While I was in college, I volunteered for emergency room work, I went on ambulance runs, and I worked as a paramedic at a time when paramedics weren't being paid. All of those experiences were instrumental in bringing me to where I am today."

Ferchau says volunteering fostered a sense of career direction even before she entered nursing school. "I worked as a Candy Stripper, and that experience helped affirm where I wanted to be, as far as being a nurse," she says.

Charlene Williams, MBA, BSN, RNC, BC, president of the American Academy of Ambulatory Care Nursing, headquartered in Pitman, N.J., says, "Volunteering provides an individual with insight into what is really going on within the nursing field and the healthcare field in general. From what I've seen, the experience provides access into many different parts of the healthcare field. It enables individuals to explore specific areas and encourages them to enter those areas."

Part-time Work

Working part-time is especially helpful to those who have finished school and are taking tentative steps in the professional arena. Some nurses increase the variety of their early experiences by taking two part-time jobs that amount to a full-time workload.



Paola Noguera

Lynn Ferchau, RN, MSN, CCRN-CSC, APN.C right, with Kimberly Aimone, staff nurse in the ICU.

That's what Foresman-Capuzzi did when she was feeling her way. "At the beginning of my career, I had always been willing to work more than one job, just so that I could get a taste of as much as I could handle," she says. "Part-time work is a big reason that I've been able to have such a diversified career. It also provided me with the versatility that enabled me to get the job I now have."

clinical experience," says Ferchau. "For instance, here at Cooper, we have an excellent clinical library and an enthusiastic educational staff with members always willing to make themselves available to students."

Internet research can also aid career exploration, she adds, though some people may become overwhelmed by the enormous amount of information available online. In that case, they need to seek the counsel of an experienced professional, and this is where mentoring comes in.

Finding one or more mentors, as many healthcare experts will attest, is among the most effective career-enriching strategies you can adopt.

"A mentor can help steer you in the right direction when you're faced with so many possible different avenues to take," says Ferchau.

Foresman-Capuzzi advises, "If you're a novice — whether as a nurse or entering a subspecialty — if you can connect with someone who is enthusiastic about sharing their experience, then get under their wing and absorb. Be a sponge. Take in as much as you can."

Resources and Mentors

During your education and the early, exploratory portion of your career, you'll find that numerous resources are readily available.

"It's important that people use the resources provided in the schools and the places where they gain their

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Williams recalls, "When I went back to college to get my master's degree, I turned to my mentor and asked her about what track I should follow. Should I get my master's in clinical nursing and be a nurse practitioner, or should I follow a management track and get an MBA? She sat me down, looked at where I was going in life and then advised me to take a business track, which worked out very well for me." (See sidebar about management vs. clinical career paths.)

Foresman-Capuzzi says one of the best ways to find a mentor is to join professional organizations. "Such organizations are filled with seasoned nurses who are more than willing to serve as mentors," she says.

Unexpected Directions

You can plan and strategize, but finding a career path is an organic process, and it can take on a life of its own. When you find your niche, you may look back and see a picture quite different from what you initially envisioned.

"Twenty years ago, back when I was in nursing school, if someone had told me that I would eventually end up on my current career path, I would have said 'No way!'" says Foresman-Capuzzi.

During those two decades, she gained experienced as a paramedic and emergency room nurse, and she worked in a children's hospital.

"At one point, I was part of a department, the PACU, that I never thought I'd end up working in," she says. "That's when I met my mentor, and through her wisdom, guidance and nurturing, I grew to love pediatrics, which became my career subspecialty."

Eventually, all of the seemingly disparate elements came together in logical, albeit unexpected, fashion.

"It had always been one of my heart's desires to teach and, one day, a teaching opportunity in pediatrics opened up," she recalls. "Because I had gained experience in pediatrics, I got the clinical educator position."

That, in turn, led to further career development. "By the time I applied for my current position, I had amassed a strong background in pre-hospital, emergency, education experience and subspecialty," she recalls. "That's why I got hired."

The lesson to gain from all of this? Open yourself to experiences and opportunities. You may be surprised to find that things will have a way of taking care of themselves.

"One day, you can look back on the tapestry of your life and say, 'oh, now I can see how everything has fit together,'" says Foresman-Capuzzi.