

1st Place Entry (2010)

By: Adam Brenneman, BSN, RN
Pediatric Intensive Care Unit

During nursing school, I remember always hearing that nursing was not a profession, that it was an art, a passion even. Part of me wrote it off, dismissing it as over zealous nursing professors obsessed with their profession. Sure, I enjoyed nursing, but was it a passion? It was not until I started working in the pediatric intensive care unit at Childrens Hospital Los Angeles that I realized those professors might just be onto something. During my relatively short career, I have seen more on my unit than I ever thought I would. My patients have ranged from newborns to 25 year olds. They have had everything from chronic illnesses that have made it impossible for them to leave the hospital to an accidental trauma that has landed them in our care. As pediatric nurses, we focus not only on caring for our patients but their families as well. I have seen parents and families at the absolute worst time in their lives, and it did not take me long to realize that this unit was not for the faint of heart, or those who lacked passion. Maybe I did have a passion for nursing. Maybe I was not giving myself enough credit.

But there came a moment when it became utterly clear to me that nursing was my passion. In order for you to understand it, I would need to tell you a story. It is hard to explain the pure joy that I feel remembering it. It's a story about a baby boy and the night he got a new heart.

There is a disease known as cardiomyopathy, which literally means heart muscle disease and as you can imagine, it is not very compatible with living. The only cure is a heart transplant. That is where our story begins. The baby boy had this disease and had been calling the pediatric intensive care unit at Childrens Hospital Los Angeles his home since he was born ... nine months ago. Our mission for the previous nine months was to keep him alive until we found a heart for him, and since infant hearts are hard to come by, we waited ... and waited. He needed a machine to breathe, and a small pharmacy of medications given around the clock to maintain his optimal health. Almost every single nurse on the unit had been his nurse at least once. Many of us had cared for him more times than we can remember. All of us had our ups and downs with him, from rocking out to soft rock all night long with him (his favorite song being "Careless Whisper" by George Michael, at least that's what I like to think) to watching him extubate himself four times on four separate occasions, with a mere flick of his head (which was almost cute because you got to see him without a tube in his mouth, but we were too busy being scared out of our mind and running around trying to get ready for the emergent re-intubation). But no matter what, he always had an endearing quality to him. He was only months old, being put through more than most of us could ever imagine, yet he kept on truckin' along.

When I walked onto the unit that night there was a rumor, a whisper in the air, so soft as though we did not want to jinx him, that this little boy was finally getting a heart. You could literally see every nurses' and doctors' face light up as

the words sunk in.

It was so strange seeing his mom packing up all his belongings that had accumulated over the past nine months. She was crying tears of joy while constantly being interrupted by hugs from the many healthcare providers that were so overjoyed by this moment. His mother was eternally grateful for every one of us, no matter how small of a part we played in her baby boy's life here at CHLA, from housekeeping to attendings. We all were afraid to leave on our breaks for fear of missing the send off.

As the moment arrived and the OR staff prepared for transport, we all began to gather, overwhelmed, knowing that his time had come. We nurses comforting his mother, who was crying uncontrollably, her eyes red and face soaked with her own tears of joy, many of us tearing up as well. Her baby boy was getting a new heart. In a flurry of good wishes and tears, he was carted away through a tunnel of nurses, doctors and healthcare providers with such pomp and circumstance worthy of royalty.

As the travel monitor faded into the distance, I realized this is the reason why I am passionate about what I do. Nursing is more important than most realize, more important than I had ever realized. In that moment, I understood if it had not been for the effort of all of the PICU nursing staff, that baby boy would not have made it to this moment and would not be getting a new heart. I finally comprehended that it was because his mother had us to lean on, she had hope and the support she needed to be strong for her baby. As I watched that baby boy roll away, I finally appreciated the passion that was nursing. I finally grasped why I was a nurse.

I get asked all the time, "How can you work with sick children?" It is a simple response, because I am passionate about it. Yes, this job can be intense, and yes, sometimes it seems like the bad outweigh the good. But sometimes ... you get to stand in a hallway, an hour after you have already clocked out, and hear the sounds of a heart monitor getting closer and closer with a child's mother you've come to know over the past nine months, and you get to see her face light up as she sees her baby boy for the first time ... with his brand new heart. The tin man begged for a heart, and all he got was some velvet stuffed with sawdust. That night, a baby got a new heart, and I have to admit ... the real thing is far more magical.