

MC Nursing Students Working with Superheroes at Youth Haven Camp

by

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"Yes, I want to be a lawyer. I was the only student in my class who originally thought Superman was a better super hero than Batman," said a precocious Aviva as she explained the debate that went on in her class this past school year. Aviva is a camper at the Youth Haven Camp (YHC). YHC is a week-long, sleep away camp for kids ages 7 to 14 who are either living with or otherwise affected by HIV. Sponsored by the Lutheran Social Services (LSS) of the National Capital Area, YHC is one of many opportunities provided by LSS designed to fight the stigma of HIV and AIDs and normalize the lives of young people. "In the end," a confident and smiling Aviva stated, "I had everyone in the class agreeing with me. You don't understand, the entire class started off against me, and then voted in my favor when I finished my arguments. Superman was the better super hero."

It's ironic that Aviva's debate surrounded arguments about superheroes. To use that metaphor, she and her fellow campers are, in fact, the true superheroes and they don't even know it. In many ways, YHC allows them to shed the facade of "Clark Kent" from their normal, everyday lives to fully embrace their "Superman" super selves with their fellow campers. So often they have to worry about who they are with and what they expose about their lives to others. At this summer camp, they get to be just kids. But this summer there was something different at the camp. To help in the process, YHC officials expanded on their previous relationship with Montgomery College to include allowing the camp to serve as a pediatric and leadership community clinical for fourth semester nursing students. A clinical in a summer camp setting: this is the first time for YHC; it's also the first time for MC Nursing. For both it was a win/win.

A crucial element for any pre-licensing nursing program is the clinical. It is the clinical experience that is the bridge between the theory and the practice. The value is based on the notion that students are well served by opportunities to work with and learn from nurses while doing so in the nursing care environment. This is not just a matter of integration; it is also about professional socialization. In the clinical environment, the student nurse learns to apply and develop the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes. Most nursing students typically spend their clinical opportunities in area hospitals. That makes sense. Most students want to later work in that environment as a new nurse. However, programs have to be creative with clinical placements. MC Nursing was no different.

Eight nursing students got to experience working with and learning from nurses in a summer camp setting. And, in this very special summer program, MC nursing students worked in a camp full of superheroes.

Kati Miller-Holland, Director of the Church and Community Ministries at LSS, oversees the YHC. She commented that, "It was a great boost to our children's camp program to have the involvement of nursing students from MC! The students helped with medication distribution and routine first aid, lessening the burden for our nurses during busy times. They prepared and delivered learning sessions for our campers and staff on important health topics throughout the week and we saw immediate application of their learning that resulted in the prevention of issues like poison ivy, tick bites, and sunburn. Their attention to teaching infection control techniques helped more campers need fewer hand washing prompts by our

counselors, for example." Miller-Holland continued that, "many of our campers associate nurses with persons who will inflict pain on them. The camp nurse role is one which allows the child to see the nurse as a resource for healthy daily living and emotional support, and our campers' anxieties were softened as they related to the caring and enthusiastic nursing students." She added, "thanks to all who helped make this partnership possible. We are so very grateful!"

"I felt privileged to be part of the Youth Haven clinical group...we did so much more than our other classmates," said one nursing student in evaluating the clinical experience. "I really felt like a nurse...it wasn't in the hospital...it was community health nursing," said another. And the students were able to accomplish so much: students helped to set up and maintain the health center and supplies; provided staff training during orientation; participated in camp setting and site orientation; provided staff and camper training during the camp session (blood borne pathogens, hand washing, hydration, poison ivy, skin protection/sunburn, ticks, EpiPen use and bullying); performed daily sanitation checks of the camp facility and reported findings; collaborated with health center nursing staff to assess, implement appropriate interventions, evaluate and document routine and emergent camper and staff care; gave daily medications to campers and staff as needed; participated with campers in general camp activities; and, collaborated with multi-disciplinary staff to address emergent camp issues.

It is important to note that the entire health care team at YHC was intricately connected to Montgomery College: the nursing supervisor, Verena McKenzie, is a graduate of MC nursing (2012). The two additional volunteer nurses, both current MC nursing faculty and staff, are also MC alumni (class of 1990 and 2002, respectively). "Being a student nurse at Youth Haven Camp was an amazing opportunity. My students applied all of the concepts from previous and current courses...they really provided holistic nursing care to the 5 dimensions of a person (physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and socio economic)," said Melissa Sprague. Sprague was the Clinical Professor for these students. She is also an alumnus of the program (1986). "It was even more meaningful because their preceptors were all MC graduates."

No doubt this camp was a wonderful opportunity for our students. "It provided an opportunity to students to be exposed to under privileged children and to developmental levels from ages 7 years to 14, as well as the adults. Also, it gave the students the opportunity to interact and communicate with participants, practice clinical skills, educate, supervise, deal with ethical issues, work with a multidisciplinary team, practice risk management, quality improvement and problem solve," added Mirna Ostchega, one of the volunteer nurses at the site. "In other words," Ostchega continued, "the students got to demonstrate the role of a registered nurse."

This was also Ostchega's first experience as a volunteer in this kind of environment. "I've been a critical care nurse for 25 years in the intermediate care unit, medical intensive care unit and the ED. I've been teaching at MC since 2000," commented Ostchega. "I was surprised by two things: how enthusiastic and resilient these kids were in spite of some of the issues affecting them. They always looked on the bright side. It was indeed admirable and uplifting to me," she said. "I was feeling a little bit anxious about the whole experience. As a nurse most of my working life has been with adults in the clinical area and in education. So, the second pleasant surprise was how wonderful it was to be able to easily transfer my skills as an educator and a clinician to a different developmental group."

But the proof of the value of this experience is, as they say, "in the pudding." On day five of the camp experience, some of the LSS donors came to the camp site for a tour. At lunch one of the donors was in line to get his food. A very observant camper approached him, noticing what looked like some sort of insect on his back. The camper, motioning her friend to join her, zeroed in on the "bug" to study it. The staffer said that the campers could be heard questioning whether the bug was in fact a tick. An LSS staffer who heard the conversation said, "One girl said, 'is this a tick? Could this be a tick? Lets' look at it?'" The staffer then reported that, as one of the girls gently removed the bug from the back of the visitor with her napkin; the second camper could be heard saying, 'oh, did you get the head? Let's look at it close to make sure.' It is in moments like these that one knows the value of the educational experience.

It was a nursing student who taught the campers about ticks. She first assessed their knowledge by asking them to draw what they thought a tick looked like. The student then proceeded to share all kinds of details with the children about tick identification, removal and dangers. Her teaching culminated in a "tick knowledge" jeopardy game. She finished the experience by giving each camper a mini flashlight to aid in the future visualization and identification of the ticks should the camper encounter one. In this experience, relevant health teaching and learning is made real for the MC nursing student; the camper has expanded his or her knowledge. The student is enriched by the experience, the camper is empowered.

"Before I begin," said nurse Ostchega, "we are going around the circle and I'd like each of you to tell me one thing you like about yourself and one thing you'd like to change." It is here in this session about puberty with the camp girls that things really start to ignite in a very positive way. It's been a long week. A week full of tie dye, obstacle courses, s'mores, a dance party, and many topics on health. Most of the time, the health discussions have been fun. Sometimes the topics, particularly grief and bullying, have brought out stress, and even a little anger in some of the campers. This simple request by the nurse was intended to be an ice-breaker, but it has turned out to be so much more than that. The result was ultimately magical--a rallying point. In a statement that almost rendered the entire room to tears, that once confident Aviva now spoke in a voice that seemed to tremble. This is the same camper who, on day one of the camp, gleefully shared her school debate success.

"I want to start with the thing I don't like about myself first," she said. "The thing I don't like about myself is my face. When people first see me, they make judgments about me. They usually don't take the time to get to know me. They dismiss me, just because of the way I look." Aviva paused. For a moment, the room--usually full of side chats, cell phone sneaks and snickers--fell silent. Some in the room sighed; others, including some of the adult staff, wiped away tears. A few even lowered their heads and covered their eyes. Aviva then continued. "The thing I like about myself is probably that same thing" she offered. "My face. When people do take the time to get to know me, they really get to know me and they are true to me-- not because of how I look but because of who I am."

What a superhero!

Dara Yah'ya, the Program Manager for the camp is responsible for the conceiving and implementing the day-to-day operations. Ms. Yah'ya offered her thoughts about the MC nursing students. "The participation of the nursing students was very helpful. The presence of the nursing students built the idea of patient -

caregiver camaraderie. Often times our campers' experiences with health care workers are limited to feelings of fear, anxiety, and grief. Here was an opportunity for the campers to see nurses as a part of their support team along the road to health and wellness." Yah'ya continued. "The presentations given by the nursing students were informative, age appropriate, and fun. The use of small group discussions, crafts, and games to teach health fit right in with our camp and was very effective. During a kickball game a camper yelled out, 'Don't forget the tick check' as a counselor returned from retrieving a foul ball from the woods. Additionally, having the nursing students present allowed the counselors to continue to supervise the whole group in the event of first aid need for an individual camper. I look forward to next summer with Montgomery College nursing students."

Montgomery College nursing looks forward to expanding on and improving upon the collaborations in the future. It's not always the case that one gets to work with superheroes! A special THANK YOU goes out to the following entities who supported MC nursing participation in this endeavor by providing resources: MC Health Sciences' Dean, Angie Pickwick; MC Nursing Director, Barbara Nubile; MC Nursing Lab Coordinator, Patsy O'Meara; The Olney Children's Dental Office; The Montgomery County Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, Inc.; The Dental Offices of Drs. Duane Erickson and Jean Hong; and Put Life First, Windy Crumm, President.