

Nurse at senior living community: confidant, friend and family member



ZACK WAJSGRAS/THE DAILY PROGRESS

It was 25 years ago that Our Lady of Peace Retirement Community opened its doors to serve the seniors of the Charlottesville area. The community offers retirement living, assisted living, traditional long-term nursing care and Alzheimer's memory care. A lot of things have changed in those 25 years. But one thing that has remained constant is the presence of one nurse, Assisted Living Unit Manager Tonya Taylor, LPN.

Taylor began her career 24 years ago at Our Lady of Peace. At the time, she was a Certified Nurse's Aide (CNA). Her role was a natural one for Tonya. Growing up in Charlottesville, she was a primary caregiver for her grandparents. As they began to age and rely on her daily, Tonya developed a strong desire to explore the opportunity to do this type of work for a living.



ZACK WAJSGRAS/THE DAILY PROGRESS

"I have always had a passion for caring for others, especially seniors," Taylor said. "Our Lady of Peace has afforded me the opportunity to grow professionally

and I've been promoted multiple times. I attended The Richmond School of Health & Technology and received my nursing certification so I could become an LPN. I have been a Charge Nurse for the past 5 years and am presently the Assisted Living Unit Manager."

The Confidant

Why is this tenure so critical? Because providing care to a senior is very unique in this setting. The nurses are much more than just a nurse. They become trusted confidants.

Sue Corney has been a resident of Our Lady of Peace for 14 years. Sue was a buyer in New York City for a department store on 5th Avenue. After she retired, her brother invited her to move to Virginia to share his home at Lake Monticello. Once the siblings realized they weren't getting any younger, they both moved into their own apartments at Our Lady of Peace Retirement Community.

"I have been quite content here," Mrs. Corney said. "You develop a feeling of trust and friendship with the nurses that you don't get in a doctor's office or the hospital. This is a reassuring type of relationship. It's much more than just an office visit."

"People here knew my son was dying. I just needed a hug. Somehow I was drawn to Tonya and needed to talk to somebody in a little more depth. Tonya is such a warm, loving, professional nurse. She's just a compassionate friend, as well as my nurse."

The death of any child is overwhelming to parents, who can never be fully prepared for their child to precede them in death. Parental grief is intense, long-lasting and complex. Sue Corney relied on the love and compassion from her nurse to give her comfort and reassurance during that difficult time.

The Friend

Research shows that social connections improve the quality of life. Not only do they get the medical support they need from their nurses, but they have the opportunity to build those friendships and develop strong bonds over time as well. Intergenerational friendships offer unique benefits. The key is finding something that the nurse and resident may have in common.

Eileen DeClerk joined Our Lady of Peace Retirement Community 3 years ago. She refers to herself as being friendly and kind and says, "I am my own best company."

Soon after she joined the senior living community, it became clear that DeClerk and her nurse Taylor had something in common.

"I have a nice collection of elephants in my apartment and Tonya has a smaller display of them in her office," DeClerk said, "When you are living in a community setting like this, you have to like the people. When you find something you have in common, it makes it that much easier."

Elephants are symbolic of strength and power. They are praised not only for their longevity, but also their cooperative spirit and loyalty. It's no surprise here that DeClerk and Taylor have been connected by having the same passion, even if they are separated in age by decades.

The Family

The profession of nursing as we think of it today is a somewhat new development. The first nursing school was not instated until Florence Nightingale did so in the 1850s, when the necessity became evident in catastrophic European wars. While the need for formal training of nurses is relatively new, the need to care for others is as old as mankind as family members recognized the need. It is in this tradition that Tonya Taylor today cares for her residents at Our Lady of Peace.

The need for such care was paramount for Andre Evans, as he sought a community for himself after the passing of his beloved wife. Evans retired from a legal and judicial career in Virginia Beach and was very particular about where he wanted to live. The property had to be close to one of his two sons, Avery, a neurosurgeon at UVa. Among other requirements, the availability for good nursing care was a priority. Such skill was not unknown to Evans. His mother was one of six sisters, all of whom devoted themselves in one way or another to the nursing profession.

An extensive search in the Charlottesville area and North Carolina, where his other son lives, presented a myriad of possibilities. Most importantly, Evans was looking for a place where he felt part of a family. He found that at Our Lady of Peace.

"I came to realize that not only did it feel this way, it was family," Evans said.

To a remarkable degree, many of the non-administrative personnel are related. Nurses are frequently mother and daughter. Taylor is a good example. Not only has she been a vital part of the community from the beginning, but both her children are as well.

"Everyone listens when Tonya speaks," Evans said. "And it is not because she is the Charge Nurse; she is likely their mother, aunt, or cousin."

