

Career in caring inspires student intent on following role model's example

By DENNIS MAGEE, Courier Regional Editor

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WATERLOO --- An assignment earlier this year made Laurie Bailey think about an old friend, someone who helped her through a difficult time in her life.

"It was Sally."

Laurie, 21, is a senior in the University of Iowa College of Nursing. Her task earlier this year was to explain why she wanted to be there.

When she was about 7, Laurie spent a good bit of time at Allen Hospital. She had developed a serious urinary tract infection that required multiple procedures and ultimately surgery. Many of the necessary steps to recovery were painful. Some of the details are hazy, but one episode in particular stands out in vivid color.

"I remember just screaming and they had to hold me down," Laurie says.

Nurse Sally Kelly arrived, inserting an IV needle that had thwarted others' repeated attempts.

"She got it right away," Laurie says.

"I trusted her a lot. My parents couldn't be there all the time. She was there."

Kelly guided Laurie and her parents, Bob and Marsha Bailey of Readlyn, for weeks and remembers them as tight-knit and supportive.

"She left an impression on us, too," Marsha Bailey says.

So much so that Laurie wrote letters to her former nurse for a time.

"She was a darling little girl," Kelly says.

Laurie grew up and knew what she wanted to become. More importantly, who would serve as role model.

Mother knows best.

Kelly credits Franciscan nuns with instilling a sense of purpose early in her life. Kelly attended parochial schools in Waterloo, including Columbus High School.

Her first ambition, though, was to move to Florida and work for Cypress Gardens.

"I was a pretty good water-skier."

Her mother thought otherwise and insisted on college and a more sensible career. Kelly's first year at what was then Allen Lutheran School of Nursing included frequent bouts of tears. Those were followed by weekly words of encouragement from her mother to return to the dormitory.

"I moved all my stuff home every Friday night," Kelly says. "I was just not going to be a nurse."

Along the way, though, she met her first patient. And she realized her calling.

In 1964, Kelly graduated with a nursing diploma. She later earned a bachelor of science degree from Coe College and, ultimately, a master's of science administration from Notre Dame.

Long before that, though, Kelly went to work. She accepted a job at Cook County Hospital in Chicago, at the time a notoriously overcrowded and underfunded public medical center.

Because Allen had an affiliation with Cook County, Kelly, a registered nurse in pediatrics, visited the Chicago hospital before receiving her diploma.



Sally Kelly, 64, followed her mother's wishes and became a nurse. But she says only after getting started did she learn the importance of the calling. Kelly is in her fourth year as patient relations coordinator at Allen Hospital.

"I thought, 'Oh my god. This is terrible. I've got to come back and clean this up,'" she said.

A colleague in Illinois explained the situation graphically.

"Cook County is the hellhole of the world. Pediatrics is the hellhole of Cook County. And the fourth floor is the hellhole of pediatrics," Kelly remembers hearing.

The average term of employment for a nurse at the hospital was three months. Kelly stayed four years.

"They didn't have enough of anything."

The unit, designed to hold about 45 children, frequently contained more than 100, Kelly says. She and others tore sheets to make diapers and used tape to hold beds together.

Kelly looks back fondly nonetheless.

"I only left because the novelty of Chicago wore off."

And she had other ambitions, like getting married and having children.

Kelly bounced around, making stops in her career in Hennepin County, Minn., and in Cedar Rapids.

"When you are single and a nurse, you can be pretty gutsy," she says. "The jobs are there."

In 1979, she returned to Waterloo, accepting a position at People's Clinic. The concept was to help patients with low incomes, and Kelly was the medical facility's first paid employee. She helped line up doctors and volunteers, but early on Kelly was pretty much on her own.

"Me and my stethoscope," she says.

Patient's voice

Kelly, 64, is in her fourth year as patient relations coordinator at Allen Hospital. Her job is to serve as an advocate for those seeking medical care and for their families.

"The hospital pays me to make sure our patients get the care they expect, the care they deserve," Kelly says.

Concerns might include questions about a bill or requests for a second opinion. Frequently, though patients simply want information.

In passing out her business cards, Kelly explains the meaning.

"Now you own a nurse. And I will shepherd you through this," she says. "Twenty-four hours. That's how I see my job."

Kelly offers a word of caution, too.

"I have no authority, but I know all the go-to people."

Which doesn't mean patients --- or Kelly --- always get their way. Sometimes the answer is no or not now. The important issue is caring.

"A lot of time, that's all they care about, that someone tried," Kelly says.

Kathy Rasmusson is a registered nurse at Allen and has been Kelly's colleague for more than 20 years through three different employers. She assigns Kelly's effectiveness to a philosophy.

"She always puts the patient's needs first," Rasmusson says.

On one occasion, a young boy from the Amish community was admitted for several weeks. The extended stay presented a dilemma for his mother, who was nursing an infant and had several children at home. The hospital's staff also had a problem because the boy did not speak English.

Kelly found space and beds for the woman, her baby and another 2-year-old child. The arrangement was not in accordance with official hospital policy.

"But it was common sense," Kelly says.

Rasmusson offers simple praise for her friend.

"She's somebody you'd want taking care of your family."

On a mission

Tending patients transcends the job description.

"I think it's sacred," Kelly says.

She is Catholic and believes her faith demands nothing less. One of Jesus' messages, she adds, was to care for the sick. Which makes

nursing more mission than career.

"We get paid to live the Gospel of Christ," Kelly says. "We'd better do it well."

Comforting those in need can hardly be construed as a burden.

"You don't have to pay me a dime for nursing. You have to pay me for the paperwork," she has told hospital administrators.

Jim Waterbury, vice president of institutional advancement at Allen, says Kelly isn't shy about asking for help. But confrontation isn't her style.

"Sally defines nursing," he says.

"Not only that, she's instantly recognizable: She's one of the few nurses that still wears the cap."

For how much longer, though, is an open question. Kelly and her husband, Pat, have talked about retirement. Pat works for Black Hawk-Grundy County Mental Health and is already part way there.

Pulling the plug, however, will be difficult on a career spanning more than 40 years.

"I could never quit cold turkey. I could never just say, 'Oh, I don't want to be a nurse anymore.'"

Seeing a replacement, at least figuratively speaking, on the horizon offers some hope. And reassurance.

"You always wonder what the next generation is going to be, if they will be as committed," Kelly says.

Gift exchange -

As part of her assignment, Laurie made a pencil sketch of a photo from 1992. The image shows her as a young girl with a favored nurse. Laurie and her parents presented the gift to Kelly in April.

They had not seen each other in perhaps 15 years. Laurie's grandfather, Milton Huebner, a volunteer at Allen, helped re-establish the connection.

Until reuniting, Laurie says she recalled Kelly as more of a presence than an actual person.

"I remember bits and pieces, but she made a huge impact," Laurie says.

The reason, though, wasn't entirely clear until Laurie and Kelly were face to face.

"When I met her I said, 'Oh, this is why,'" Laurie says.

"She has so much empathy."

Kelly gave her young friend, now grown, a porcelain lantern symbolic of Florence Nightingale, the famous nurse who revolutionized the profession. Kelly received the lantern as a gift when she graduated from nursing school.

"She was supposed to pass it on to her daughter, but she never had any children," Laurie says. "So she decided to give it to me. I cried so hard."

Meeting Laurie, Kelly recognized common qualities she ascribes to the best nurses.

"She has a fire in her belly and compassion in her soul," Kelly says.

She downplays her role in shaping Laurie's interest, however. That credit should go to her parents and grandparents, not hospital staffers assigned to poke and prod a sick little girl.

"I guess I'm glad we didn't knock it out of her," Kelly says.

Laurie has one more year of school and is considering her options as a nurse. She is thinking of starting her career in Chicago ...

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