

West Piedmont Health District

December 7, 2023

Like Mother, Like Daughter

You hear the phrase, “like father, like son” very often but not so much for mothers and daughters. There are two public health nurses in the West Piedmont Health District who do actually epitomize the phrase and who, as a mother-daughter team, bring their nursing skills to the betterment of the community.

Robin McBride, RN, and her daughter Ashley West, LPN, are two of West Piedmont’s public health nurses staff who work side-by-side to serve patients in the district.

Robin’s path into nursing was not conventional. After working in retail for most of her adult life, she became “not a young nurse” at almost 40 years old in 2007. While her career had been gratifying, she had begun to ponder a change and wondered “what more can I do?” Somewhat idly, she had paged through the local community college catalog looking at the various programs and considering what she might be good at. Nothing really hit a chord until she got to programs in the health field. They ticked the box for wanting to help the community, but she wasn’t really committed to making a change yet.

Then she ran into a friend who said “Guess what I’m doing? You need to do this with me.” It was the nudge she needed, thinking “You’re going to be 40 years old with a degree or without it, so you might as well do it. When I saw her, I said that’s gotta be a sign.”

Getting that associate degree in nursing and the first few years working in the field wasn’t easy. Robin started going to college in the midst of the textile shutdown, when the local economy was devastated by textile and furniture factory closures forced by NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and foreign competition. Her husband lost his job. He returned to school under the Trade Act and she joined him, applying for every kind of financial aid she could find. She received a scholarship from Moses Cone Hospital which paid for her entire second year of nursing school and took a job there after graduating. Her children were in high school. As anyone in the nursing field knows, the first few years are particularly tough because not only are you learning the job, but you also have to work the more undesirable schedules on nights and weekends.

“When your whole family and everything is in a dayshift world, it’s really hard,” Robin said. “One day I kind of dozed off, and you know, you hit those rumble strips and that wakes you up real quick.” That was her wake-up call to search for a job with a more compatible schedule. After another couple of years (at Memorial Hospital, now SOVAH Martinsville), she finally landed at the Henry-Martinsville Health Department in 2012 working clinics and baby-care. Now, after 11.5 years at WPHD, she oversees the Family Planning and STI program for Henry Martinsville HD and the Every Woman's Life program for the district.

Ashley, on the other hand, knew since she was about four years old and sticking band-aids all over her baby dolls, that she wanted to be a nurse. In high school she really enjoyed the health occupations class

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and won the HOSA state competition for Virginia and then as a senior placed in the national competition in Nashville. Her wins showed resilience in the face of adversity, as she used her family's personal experience during the NAFTA shutdowns to craft speeches about how healthcare and insurance were impacted by the resulting loss of jobs.

Following high school, she "tried the (four-year) college thing" but didn't like being away from home and family, so earned a CNA certificate from Patrick & Henry Community College at 19. She was working as a CNA in nursing homes until she had her first daughter in 2012, when she realized she needed to advance her career for the stability of her family. In 2014, she became a LPN, but was still working in nursing homes. It was an unforgiving schedule for family life.

"If it snows, you have to go to work. If it storms, you have to go to work even though your kids may be out of school. After my second daughter was two months old in 2015, I went back to work and during the first week back it starts to snow, and I couldn't leave. It was time to do something more child friendly."

Ashley went to work at PATHS Community Medical Center and worked in family practice and in the Suboxone program. The last year she was there, she worked in OB/GYN which she found she enjoyed. By this time, she had three kids, and her oldest daughter was playing a lot of sports. She found she was missing games, plays, and other school events. That's when she came to work at WPHD, finding herself working next to Mom.

This spring, she begins a program to earn a bachelor's degree in nursing and her RN from Wilson College in Pennsylvania.

While each find working as a public health nurse to be much more family friendly, Ashley and Robin also discovered an entirely different work environment. Public health nursing is more about prevention and education, they say, "and maybe we can keep patients from needing treatment from the hospital or doctor," said Robin.

"We see a lot of people who have no primary care, and there are a lot of people who can't leave work to go to a doctor."

In their roles, they share information and make referrals for both men and women's health (pap smears, mammograms, testicular cancer, STIs, colonoscopies) along with administering vaccines. Their vantage point as public health nurses allows them to see trends in the community, such as increasing cases of syphilis and congenital syphilis (there was a stretch when they would see three cases a week) and diabetes. They have also observed a growing Hispanic/Latino population that increasingly needs health care.

"The health department plays a critical role. In this deeply rooted, family-oriented community, when a child comes in for a vaccine, the entire family may come in for something. Many have never had care before," Robin said.

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Ashley added that while the health department has access to a language line to help communicate with non-English-speaking patients, you can't develop a comfort level and trust with a telephone. There are two Spanish-speaking individuals on staff, but they have other duties and are not always available to interpret. A partnership with United Way provides a Spanish-speaking community health worker who visits once a week, and that has been invaluable, but the greatest need they see currently is for an interpreter.

As for working side-by-side, the mother and daughter have a deepened respect for each other and their abilities and accomplishments. Ashley says that the age difference between them doesn't matter in the office, they still learn from each other. And Robin couldn't be prouder of her daughter for starting at the bottom as a nurse aide and working her way up.

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