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Nurses: The Heart of Health Care is a specialty publication of the Richmond Times-Dispatch. Questions should be directed to Stephen Summerell at (804) 649-6182.

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A CELEBRATION OF NURSES

Once again the Richmond Times-Dispatch is celebrating National Nurses Week by bringing you 10 heroes who through their skill, compassion and dedication form the backbone of our health care industry. In the following pages you will be introduced to newbies and veterans, men and women, all of whom share the burden of being your advocate in a time of need.





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ELISABETH ALT

Bringing the job valuable insight

Every day at work, I have the opportunity to witness new life come into the world – occasions that are accompanied by boundless joy and, sometimes, profound sadness. I'm there with families as babies take their first breath. I've held a mother's hand as her child goes to the neonatal intensive care unit. I never take these moments for granted.

I'm now a mother-baby nurse at Bon Secours Memorial Regional Medical Center. I came to the job later than many others do. I crossed paths with nurses as a teenager when my mother got sick and later passed away. When my daughters were born, I once again felt the power of nurses. When my youngest daughter started school, I did too – nursing school.

Nursing for me is an opportunity to serve people. I always knew I wanted to make a difference. I started in pediatrics (just as the pandemic was beginning) and went to obstetrics after a year. Here, I've found that I can make special connections when the opportunity presents itself.

I was adopted as an infant. When I was young, that made me curious and led to lots of questions: What's it like to be a birth mother? What drives adoptive parents? Adoption is a subject fraught with many emotions for everyone involved.

When we had an adoptive situation in our unit, I discovered that my perspective was able to help. I also realized that I still have so very much to learn about myself. We had an expectant mother who put her baby up for adoption. I shared my story with her because I wanted her to feel supported and help her through a difficult experience. It felt like it was a normal and natural thing to do.

I witnessed the love on the birth mother's face and the agony she went through making the choice to create a better life for her baby. I watched the transition to the adoptive family and saw the unshakeable bonds they instantly made with their child. This changed my perspective on my own path. It gave me insight I hadn't had before.

The pandemic showed us a lot of things, especially the invaluable support that friends and family provide for people in the hospital. Because visitation was limited, we had to dig deep and figure out how to provide both physical and spiritual support. That's the heart of nursing – providing everything that patients need to be whole again, even if it means showing your own human side in the process.

Hometown: Mechanicsville

Family: Husband, Matthew; daughters, Bailey, 12, and Daphne, 10

Became an RN: 2020

Employer: Bon Secours Memorial Regional Medical Center

How communities can honor local nurses

By Metro Creative

The stress associated with the nursing profession has been well documented. A 2022 study published in the journal BMC Nursing found that job stress not only has an adverse effect on nurses' health, but also may reduce performance and quality of care, potentially affecting the outcome of patients.

There's no denying nurses have a lot of weight on their shoulders. That reality underscores the importance of letting nurses know how much they're appreciated. Community leaders can consider these ideas as they look for ways to honor local nurses.

Recognize nurses at public events. Parades, high school sporting events, holiday tree lighting ceremonies, and other community-centric events draw large crowds. That makes these events the perfect time to honor local nurses and emphasize all the work they do to help their neighbors. Ask a local nurse or two to serve as grand marshal(s) in a holiday parade and/or let local nurses flip the switch at a tree lighting ceremony. Community dignitaries like a mayor or local police chief can explain who the honoree is once the crowd gathers.

• Support a nursing charity. A community-wide campaign to support a charity that benefits nurses or causes important to nurses can be a great way to thank them for all they do. Various domestic and international organizations are linked to the nursing profession. Prior to introducing a campaign, community leaders can speak with local nurses to see if there is any specific charity or cause important to them. Some charities may provide job training in communities where nursing shortages have made it hard for locals to access quality health care, while others may finance health care operations, including staffing of nurses, in underprivileged countries.

• Publicize and support efforts to improve on-the-job safety for nurses. The American Nurses Association noted that nurses were forced to reuse masks or purchase their own safety equipment during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Communities that want to express their appreciation for nurses can support efforts to ensure working conditions are safe for nurses and that nurses donÕt need to reach into their own pockets in an effort to avoid illness.

• Embrace public health efforts. One of the most effective ways to honor local nurses is to take a little off their professional plate. Community leaders can urge residents to get their annual flu shots and update other vaccinations in an effort to keep hospital admissions low, which in turn makes nursing easier.



METRO CREATIVE





SARAH ANDERSON

Forging connections

Nursing is about making connections. Put yourself in the shoes of a patient, and it's easy to understand why forging bonds with those in need is important.

Nurses interact with patients who are facing a challenge that's especially personal – their own health and well-being. Those we serve place their trust in a team that more often than not is unfamiliar to them. Connecting with patients and their families on a personal level helps ease the burden.

As nurses, we know this from our own experience. Most of us have been on the other side, either as a patient or as the family member of one. We know how it feels when medical providers rush. We understand how frustrating it is when it seems like you're not being heard.

Nurses are very task-oriented, but we can't be all task-oriented, all the time. It's important that we make a special effort to get to know those in our care.

I'm a charge nurse for an outpatient surgery unit, and that gives my colleagues and me some time to find out a little about our patients. There are several topics that usually serve well to establish a relationship. Even something as simple as where the patient is from is a good icebreaker. We can often find people we know or places that we go in common.

There's a gentleman who comes to see us frequently and I've been able to bond with him over our shared love for patriotism. He served in the armed forces, and we've had conversations about the importance of mental health and how many veterans take their own life. He gave me pushpins that he received for being a veteran and that gift was very meaningful for me.

Part of making those personal connections is showing strength when the occasion calls for it. That's as important for patients and their families as personalizing the care they receive.

A lesson I've learned in nursing is never to take life for granted. I've seen occasions when a family leaves for the day with no indication of any problems, only to have the situation take a turn for the worse.

At those times when good news is sparse, it's our responsibility as caregivers to be the rock for them to lean on. As much as we want to cry with them – we're human, too – that's when we must dig deep and project strength.

That's why we make connections. Caregiving is a relationship that's built on expertise, knowledge and, just as importantly, trust.

Hometown: Disputanta

Family: Husband, Kris; sons, Greyson and Camden

Became an RN: 2013

Employer: Bon Secours Southside Medical Center

How to determine if nursing is right for you

By Metro Creative

With strong job security and the potential for growth, it is no wonder nursing draws such interest. In 2021, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated there would be more than 200,000 openings for registered nurses each year for the next decade. And employment of registered nurses is expected to grow by 6 percent between 2021 and 2031.

A strong job outlook and competitive pay – a median salary of $77,600 as of May 2021 – appeals to any aspiring professional, but a career in nursing is about more than opportunity and compensation.

Individuals considering nursing need to determine if the field might be the right fit for them. It's not always glamourous being a nurse. In fact, it can be quite challenging and often stressful. However, the rewards tend to outshine the trials and tribulations. The following are some components of nursing that can help individuals determine if the field is right for them. Training time constraints There are different levels of nursing, each of which requires a different amount of training and certification, according to Nurse Money Talk. A certified nursing assistant must complete a program at a specific CNA vocational school, and such programs run between four and 10 months, on average. Licensed vocational nurses can expect to study for 12 to 18 months, and must pass the NCLEX-PN licensing exam. Registered nurses will need two to four years of schooling and are expected to earn an associate's degree or bachelor's degree. Aspiring RNs also will need a passing grade on the NCLEX-RN licensing exam. Flexibility Nurses need to be adaptable and flexible. Shifts may not be consistent and the demands of the job may differ from day to day, even though there may be some overlap. If challenging new experiences come easy to you or if you have the flexibility to work different shifts rather than a set schedule, then nursing could be a good option. Problem-solver and critical thinker Although nurses are part of a larger health care team and may need to leave certain decisions to physicians, there are plenty of critical decisions and think-on-your-feet actions that may need to be taken to ensure patient health. It is essential for nurses to keep their emotions in check so they can think clearly in stressful situations. Good communicator Nurses must be able to speak and interact with doctors and others in a clinical setting, but also communicate effectively with patients who may not fully understand what is happening to them. Nursing requires social skills and an ability to pivot between many different roles, all the while adjusting communication tactics depending on the audience. Organized and diligent There isn't too much room for mistakes in health care, which means nurses will need to maintain their attention to detail; otherwise, they could subject patients to injury or even death. In addition to these traits, good nurses should have compassion for patients. A desire to help others during difficult times compels many people to become a nurse.



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DANA HUBBARD

Understanding the workings of the human heart

Life goes in many directions, and often we don't realize how that affects those around us until time has passed. My father always taught us about responsibility and service and about treating those around us with respect. When I was 16, he had open heart surgery. Because of that, I became interested in the heart and its workings.

In college, I initially aimed to study counseling, psychology and education. But I soon realized that nursing was my calling. It combined everything I'd been taught as a girl about serving others and allowed me to pursue my interests in the human heart. Today, I am a cardiac care nurse at Chippenham Hospital.

When my girls were young, they would talk to me about my job. Full of curiosity, they often asked innocent questions: "What happened to your patients?" "Did you fix them?" "Are they going to get better?" I answered the best I could.

When my oldest daughter reached adulthood, she expressed interest in being a nurse. We had a lot of serious conversations. We talked about the many rewarding aspects of the job, but I also made sure she understood the challenges. The profession demands long and irregular hours, requires physical strength and difficult training.

My daughter said something that remains with me to this day: "I've been training my whole life watching you." It didn't click with me until that moment how powerful all those long-ago, innocent conversations had been.

She became a nurse in 2017, and I got to pin her. Today, she works two floors above me.

In 2016, I had my own firsthand encounter with the lasting impression nurses can leave with patients. I was diagnosed with cancer. When I became a patient, I thought, "I've got this. I'm a nurse." But the truth is, I didn't have it. I was scared and suffering. I was seeing things from the patient's side for the first time.

If it wasn't for the nurses, their support and all their positive messages, I don't think I would have made it. I am grateful to them, and those interactions have framed my nursing ever since.

Being sick and requiring medical attention is a form of suffering. Hospitalization can leave people in despair. There is uncertainty in the future, and patients wonder whether they'll ever be the same again. There are many things racing through their mind, such as paying bills and the well-being of loved ones.

We once admitted a patient who had just gotten a new puppy. While under our care, the patient was worried about connecting with her new companion. My manager and I hatched a plan to sneak her outside so that her husband could drive by and she could have some much-needed puppy time.

Nursing is about connecting with people so that they know that they are more than just a patient. I know firsthand that this approach changes lives.

Hometown: Anderson, Indiana

In Richmond region: 2002

Family: Daughters, Arin, 29, and Alexis, 25; grandson, Amari, 2

Became an RN: 1999

Employer: Chippenham Hospital

JEREMY MILLER

Sometimes laughter is the best medicine

Originally nursing school was going to be a stepping-stone for me into a career as a physician, but thankfully some nurses showed me the immense rewards of choosing this path.

I've had the honor of working with many amazing nurses through the years, one of whom was a pillar of the Richmond nursing community. The late Kevin Shimp was a brilliant man who could blend compassionate bedside nursing with rigorous research. He taught me what he called the "buffalo mentality" – sometimes the most effective way to approach a problem is to run directly toward it.

That can take many forms, including injecting humor when the situation allows. I'm an okay nurse, but I'm a great class clown.

I distinctly recall a time early in my career when a patient was coming up from the emergency department after suffering a grievous injury. I read the room and snuck in a humorous comment about the appearance of his leg. He found it funny and with a sense of relief told me that he hadn't laughed since the accident. Sometimes laughter is the best medicine and can ease the tension that builds up in hospital rooms.

I know this because I've been on the patient side of hospitalization. Two months shy of graduating nursing school, I was in a car accident that resulted in 64 fractures.

I speak trauma. I had to learn to walk again. I had surgeries that didn't work and had to be redone. If there's a silver lining to that accident, it's that it afforded me the opportunity to have a more direct glimpse into what my patients go through. I am grateful for that insight. It helps with various scenarios I encounter regularly – and it allows me to get away with the occasional funny comment.

That's what's so valuable about the process of living one's life. Those experiences make us who we are. One of the challenges for a new nurse is overcoming the perception that what you're doing doesn't matter.

Nursing is a very task-heavy profession. Shifts can fly by. It takes a year or two to get to the point where you can get an assignment and organize a 12-hour shift so that all the puzzle pieces fit together and you see the progress by the end.

It takes time to become the nurse you want to be and the nurse that patients deserve. Nursing school is a vital and irreplaceable part of our training, but much of what informs us as medical professionals comes from the experiences and the people we meet along the way.

Hometown: Phoenix, Arizona

In Richmond region: 2008

Family: Wife, Tiffany; daughter, Kinley

Became an RN: 2016

Employer: Bon Secours St. Mary's Hospital and St. Francis Medical Center





AGNES KIRTON

Embracing compassionate inclusivity

One of the most touching moments in my job as a nurse is when a patient includes me as part of the family. They sometimes introduce me to a spouse, sibling or child. "This is Agnes, and she's taking care of me," the patient will tell their loved ones. I feel that embrace and inclusivity. I value those encounters.

Family is very important to me. In fact, it was my mother who inspired me to be a nurse. She was a nurse in The Philippines, and I remember seeing her on the job when my father and I would pick her up from work. She was so focused and tuned in to the patients. Then, she would come home and show the same love and attention to her family – all six of us. That unconditional devotion to others has remained with me.

No less inspiring is the dedication of my colleagues. I sense that we are a large family with a mission to bring healing, and I am moved by their loyalty. I am proud to work with colleagues, providers and an interdisciplinary care team that shares the same passion for our patients. The heart of nursing is the compassionate care we provide to our patients, as well as their family members. They are an integral part of the patient's health care continuum. My heart is full of gratitude and joy.

That's not to say that providing compassionate care is always easy. Each patient is unique. Sometimes building trust and establishing rapport takes time and effort. But having devoted colleagues alongside you makes it easier.

I frequently see the power of family bonds in the hospital, and it is enlightening. When patients come to the hospital, they are often facing difficult circumstances. But even more powerful than adversity and affliction are the love, courage and devotion that carry families through.

Nurses and other medical professionals have likewise seen their share of difficulties, especially during the pandemic. It was an unprecedented time and presented us with challenges we had never faced before. We were scared and overwhelmed. But my colleagues continued their tireless effort to render care to those who needed it. I honor their strength and dedication. I am thankful to the leadership for their support and communication during this difficult time.

If there's one truth I've learned in 40 years of nursing, it's this: Through compassion, courage and kindness we can triumph over anything that stands in our way.

Hometown: Leyte, The Philippines

In Richmond region: 1983

Family: Numerous family and friends nationally and internationally

Became an RN: 1979

Employer: Bon Secours St. Mary's Hospital

AMANDA RUTLEDGE

Advocacy is important too

Nurses wear a lot of hats. There are the expected roles: providing treatments, administering medications, endless charting. But there are other jobs, too, including empowering hospitalized people. To be a nurse is to be an advocate.

The nurse is a patient's voice when they're in the hospital. Some patients can champion their own best interests, but not everyone has the knowledge or nerve to do so. Nurses fill that void.

When I was still on the floor – I've stepped into the roles of case management and discharge since the birth of my daughter in 2021 – we used to see a gentleman who was in and out of hospital frequently and he ended up in our unit. Frankly, he could be difficult to get along with. When I was assistant manager, I heard that he was back with us and, typically, upset about the care he was receiving. He wanted to leave.

I went in to talk with him and through thoughtful, genuine dialogue, he told me that he had a lot going on in his life outside of his medical concerns. At that time, he was trying to take care of his family and pets. This was a whole new side that we had never seen. His difficult temperament had nothing to do with the care he was receiving.

I ended up sitting there and talking to him for a while. I reminded him that in order to care for his family, he needed to be treated. I couldn't fix what was going on at home, but I could talk him through it. That's advocacy.

But it's not just the patients who need someone in their corner. Medical professionals likewise need colleagues to take charge when the opportunity presents itself.

Among the areas where I developed proficiency was in peritoneal dialysis, a different form of the traditional treatment that allows patients to remain at home instead of visiting a dialysis center. Most students are not taught about this treatment in nursing school, but in the area where I work, it's quite prevalent. As new nurses have come through, we've made sure they understand this option.

I also realized that everyone would benefit from learning about peritoneal dialysis – we have a number of travel and international nurses – so I went to our management and organized classes. I just wanted to reach as many people as possible so that we could make sure patients would be getting the best care possible.

Advocacy takes many forms but it's important to remember that no matter the setting, that's as much a part of the nursing profession as anything that's on our official list of duties.

Hometown: Chester
Family: Husband, Ethan; daughter, Caroline, 2
Became an RN: 2016
Employer: Bon Secours Southside Medical Center



HEATHER SATTERLEE

The small steps to better health

As nurses, we measure progress in tiny steps.

Our jobs can sometimes be overwhelming, given the scope and intensity of our profession. And while there's much to be said for all that we contribute to the greater good, we also celebrate little things: the successful end of a challenging shift, laughter from a patient who has been in pain, and, yes, a patient who's finally able to make things happen in the bathroom.

As trivial as such small victories may sometimes seem, they are measurable progress that ultimately results in healing.

I got into the field of nursing after a long period of not knowing what direction I was headed. I moved to Richmond for a biology degree at Virginia Commonwealth University in 2000, but it wasn't until years later, when a nurse suggested I consider this path, that I realized that nursing is about much more than anatomy and physiology. While healing is the outcome we all work hard to reach, it's the little things that get you there.

As part of a medical-surgical nursing team at Richmond Community Hospital, we see a wide range of conditions, from heart failure to diabetes. I like working one-on-one with patients to teach them skills they can accomplish themselves. Even something small can make a big difference and allows patients to take charge of their destiny.

For example, I often try to teach diabetes patients how to stick themselves. Many have never given themselves a shot and are reluctant to try. Once I explain to them how to do it, the best technique is to jump right in and get it over with. The anticipation is worse than the stick. It's such a simple step, but it's a priceless skill to learn.

We get a lot of nursing students at our hospital. And with them we measure improvement little-by-little. When a student-nurse accomplishes something we consider routine, such as drawing blood from a patient, you can see that light bulb come on. It's an achievement that happens time and again, but it's always a cause for celebration.

Sometimes those tiny breakthroughs make amazing things possible. During the early days of the pandemic, when visitation wasn't allowed, many family members, especially older ones, learned how to use technology to be at the bedside of their loved ones.

Truly, the technology that we adopted during the pandemic has been a game-changer. Now we see doctors through screens. It's funny. The pandemic isolated us, but we're now more connected than ever, making it easier for us to make progress – one small step at a time.

Hometown: Onancock, Va.
In Richmond region: 2000
Family: Husband, Terry; son, Alex, 2
Became an RN: 2015
Employer: Bon Secours Richmond Community Hospital





WILL SLATE

Treating patients where they are

The health care system for many is intimidating. That's important for medical professionals to understand.

I've been around emergency services and health care for many years. As a child, I watched my dad work in materials management at Greensville Memorial Hospital. Our family also had a furniture store, and I could see the comings and goings of the hospital and hear radio traffic on a scanner.

At James Madison University, I got involved with the local fire and rescue, and earned certification in fire and as an emergency medical technician. I later went to nursing school, and then paramedic school, which is how I ended up as both a registered nurse and a volunteer paramedic.

And, as if I didn't already have enough irons in the fire, my family owns Allen's Pumpkin Farm in Emporia.

Stretched thin as I am, I've come to discover that all these different life experiences and responsibilities have done two things: They've provided a glimpse of how different groups of people intersect with medical care, and they've allowed me to make connections with people from all walks of life.

Many people use the emergency room for conditions that should be handled by a primary care physician. It's a source of frustration for hospital personnel, but the fact is many people from marginal communities don't have health insurance, and they're not going to see a family doctor no matter how many times they're told to.

If a patient comes to the ER and a physician requests a specific test, it's better to do it right then and there. Send them home and the required test will never get done.

Effective communication is vital if we want many of our neighbors to take advantage of proper medical care. It's our job to break down what is sometimes complex information into terms that patients can understand.

I make a conscious effort not to talk over people's heads. One way is to relate illnesses to something they know. If I'm talking to a mechanic who happens to have coronary artery disease, I might compare it to a clogged fuel line.

We have to remember that as much as we wish our patients had all the tools they need to maintain their health, we have to meet them where they are. For many people in the community where I live, they're going back home after a hospital visit to a place where it takes the rescue squad an hour to get to them, not fully understanding what they've been told.

We should be making medical care accessible. That's as much a part of being an effective nurse as anything else the profession requires.

Hometown: Emporia

Family: Wife, Katie; sons, Hudson and Barrett

Became an RN: 2010

Employer: Bon Secours Southside Medical Center



HAZEL SNEAD

Still learning 35 years in

Nursing is about much more than treating illnesses and injuries. Often being a caregiver means finding and addressing unanticipated needs.

I came from a true caregiver. My grandmother, who I'm named after, inspired both my sister and me to become nurses, just like she was. She didn't go to nursing school. Back then you got into nursing through training and work experience. But she was a caregiver in every sense of the word – for her patients, friends and family.

For the first part of my career, I worked with babies at a neonatal intensive care unit. I learned quickly that nursing requires we not only address a patient's immediate needs, but that we also step back and look at the big picture.

We once treated a baby with a chronic condition who spent more than a year in the hospital. His mother had four other children at home, so we had to step in and be his hospital foster parents. Eventually it was time for him to leave, but his home did not have the equipment required to handle his special needs. My husband, who worked in electrical sales, managed to get his company to donate the materials and found electricians to get the baby settled.

Now I work at Circle Center Adult Day Services, and there's just as much need for thoughtful, deliberate compassion when people are facing challenges at the other side of life.

I clearly remember one day when a man was dropped off by his daughter. It was a day he happened to be extremely agitated and angry, which is common when people suffer from dementia. When I went to get him out of the car, he grabbed my hand and held it so tight it made me nervous. We walked to his seat in silence.

Then, he looked me straight in the eye, and he was clear for just that second, and he said, "Thank you." I think about him often, and it's a good reminder that the little things you do for people make a big difference.

When people are in pain, there are often treatments that can be administered. But there are some things medications will never replace – conversation, holding a hand, letting people know that they are loved and respected.

I'm still learning how to be a nurse after almost 35 years. I'm inspired by a patient I would see when I did private home care before the pandemic. She was 102 years old and she taught me so much. She learned to be a competitive swimmer in adulthood, and she learned to use technology late in life. She taught me that you're never too old to learn. Every day brings new lessons that can't be found in a textbook.

Hometown: Richmond

Family: Husband, Donnie; children, Hayden, Olivia and Abigail

Became an RN: 1989

Employer: Circle Center Adult Day Services



JONI WADE

A lifetime of miracles

It's sometimes easy to take things for granted in nursing. So much happens during our day-to-day work. But one of the many truths I've learned over the course of a long career is that nursing is a profession that witnesses miracles.

I live a lot by my faith, and through the decades I've been able to see God's work firsthand. Sometimes this becomes clear by stepping back from the task at hand and other times it reveals itself more subtly in poignant, touching moments.

I always wanted to be a nurse. I vividly remember the exact moment when I decided. I was 7 years old, in my bedroom, and I was playing with a doll beside a doll bed. I knew then and there that nursing was what I would do, and I stayed the course. Now, after more than four decades, having served as a nurse in many different capacities, I'm glad I never strayed from that decision.

I'm director for a medical-surgical unit, but my career has meandered through many different hospital settings. I met my husband in the emergency room when he was a paramedic. He's now an ER nurse at Bon Secours Richmond Community Hospital.

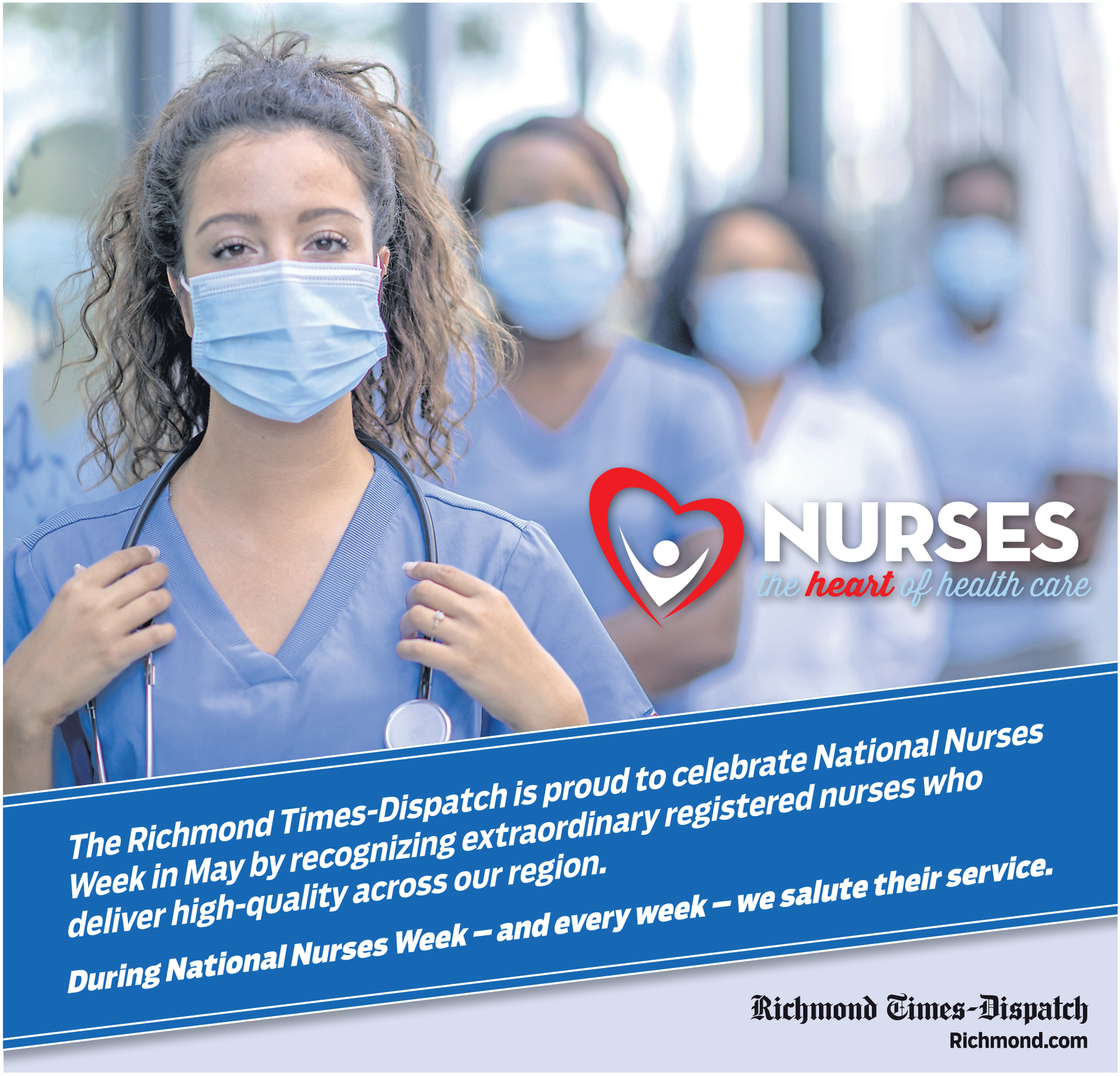
We named our first son after a patient. I had been working in the ER and a gentleman came to see us in need of care. His wife was with him and they'd been married for over 50 years. They were delightful, gracious and kind. I knew right away that they were really good people. I went home and said, "I know what I want to name our son." That was three decades ago.

That's one of the joys – and the miracles – of nursing. The fact that people invite you into the most personal times of their life and trust you with their well-being. It's something that is very dear to me. You're there when somebody is having the worst day of their life and you're there when somebody is having the best day of their life, and you can be a part of that.

The pandemic really heightened the vulnerability and deepened the trust that patients placed in the nurses who were caring for them. I spent the first half of the pandemic in the ER and the second half on a covid unit.

I distinctly remember a woman who had to come to the hospital during her pregnancy. Not only did she have to trust us with her life but also with her baby's life. She and her baby both were a miracle. We kept in touch as she moved through other units to receive care and she has shared her gratitude for her baby. I am grateful to have seen so many miracles over a lifetime of work.

Hometown: New Kent
Family: Husband, Reid; sons Hunter and Christopher
Became an RN: 1981
Employer: Bon Secours Memorial Regional Medical Center


NURSES
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The Richmond Times-Dispatch is proud to celebrate National Nurses Week in May by recognizing extraordinary registered nurses who deliver high-quality across our region.
During National Nurses Week – and every week – we salute their service.
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