

Narrative: Anonymous, Psychiatric Nurse

New River Valley, Virginia

Interviewers: Vanessa Ten-Kate, Patrick Herndon

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I'm 55 years old. I'm a registered nurse working in psychiatric nursing. I'm really enjoying it and really learning a lot.

I grew up in southwest Virginia in the coal fields. My dad was a coal miner. My mom stayed home until I was in junior high, and then she started working in a bakery. I have two kids. They're both 22.

I had jobs before I went to nursing school. I actually had three years completed of an elementary education degree, but at that time there weren't many teaching jobs. My husband was working at a hospital and I got a scholarship in their nursing program, so I decided to go into nursing. My typical shift is from 6:45 a.m. to 7 p.m. I work three 12-hour shifts in a week. Each week my days are different. If I want more time off I can request that like a month in advance.

The best part about my job is just taking care of people...helping them get better. It's just such a good feeling knowing that you're helping someone. You can't help everyone but it's just...I don't know, it's really hard to explain, but it's a really good feeling.

The hardest thing about working in psychiatry would be when patients are noncompliant with their treatment. I'm in in-patient psychiatry, so patients are there more short term. Some patients are there longer, but most are three to five days. After their stay, a few patients go to another hospital. Another tough thing is we have a lot of homeless patients. The social workers really try to place them with family or in a different type of home when they leave the facility, but a lot of patients have to go back to live in the shelter. It's sad.

Working the 12 hour shifts, I really don't get to see my family. I mean I get home at, say, eight o'clock, and I may see my husband a couple of hours and then we're off to bed. But then I'm off four days. Sometimes I do have to work the weekend and he doesn't work weekends unless he's traveling.

There are several employees where I work and you just get to know them and it's wonderful. It's the most supportive environment I've ever been in. We help each other. It's just really been good. You have to depend on each other in case something happens, especially in psychiatric because with the behavior of the patients, you don't know what's going to happen from one minute to the next. You really have to be careful with your safety and your patients' safety and your coworkers' safety. We have security there. Lots of times when security gets there, the patient settles

down. Sometimes the patient needs to get an injection to help them settle down, calm down. So what I see is that most of the patients are cooperative when all of that happens.

Um, I'm really happy there. Yeah it would nice if some of the patients had a place to go. A place to live. I wish that, um, the patients had more...like they're not allowed to go outside. I wish they had more exercise equipment and so forth like that. That's something I wish that would change. There's no smoking at all. They have a nicotine patch. But they're not allowed to go out and smoke. We just don't have the...it's probably the safety of it. They would have to be supervised, definitely. We don't have a secure outdoor environment for them.

I would like to be paid more. I have a two year degree; it's an associate's degree. I think I'm paid well for only having to go to school for two years. But it would be nice to be paid more. Now they do have shift differential. Like if you work at nights, you get paid more. You work holidays, you're paid more. You work the weekends, you get paid more.

I would recommend my job to other people because of atmosphere and people. To be a good nurse, you have to have patience, you have to give support, you need to be honest, you need to be competent, caring. Nursing is not for everyone. I have seen nurses that are burned out or this is just not for them and I think some nurses just switch different areas of nursing, to find that niche. Then I have seen nurses who just get completely out of nursing, just do something else. There's something for everyone and psychiatric nursing is not for everyone. You hear a lot of nurses say I would never want to work with pediatrics, and like, myself, I wouldn't want to work ER or intensive care, it's just not me.

When I was in high school I wanted to join the military, but my parents did not want me to do that so, so at that age I wanted to travel and I wanted to see new things, and I was, I don't know what you called it, patriotic, or just disciplined, so that was something that I thought about. Now when I was little, like early school, I remember for my student record, we had to draw a picture of what we wanted to be when we grew up, and I was like six years old. I drew the picture of a nurse with the little hat and it's really amazing that now that's what happened.

When I retire I would like to travel, yes. We go to the river, but yeah, we would like to travel once we retire. I don't know where, just different places, especially Europe; I would like to do that. I have not yet been to Europe, so you know, we love old things so I think we would love all that architecture in Italy and Europe and I would like to see that. In 10 to 15 years, I'll just be here in Blacksburg; hopefully we'll be here and just do some traveling. Maybe have some grandchildren we can spoil, so that would be nice.

The American Dream is obtainable. I think a lot of people, I don't think the American dream is in the picture or is like they thought of. I guess it's just because of the economy and the job situation, and part of the American dream is having a good job and be able to buy things and do things comfortably. I just think now the job market is more competitive and there are less jobs so...But I still think you can fulfill it, you just got to keep trying and don't, don't give up. Umm, my husband and I have fulfilled the American Dream, but my kids, you know, they're not there yet. They're still working on it.

To read the complete conversation, please see the transcript.