

Nurse of Excellence

Mykola Popyuk, LPN

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Meet Mykola.

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

I grew up in a little village in Ukraine when it was still part of the USSR. We knew nothing about washing machines, telephones, or ready products. Everything was done by hand. You cooked by the fire, like you have done years ago.

For a big part of my youth, I lived with my grandmother, who was like a mother to me. She would volunteer to help sick people in the village with the most horrifying illnesses. You could call most of those who got sick, hospice because there was no medical insurance or treatments. Only for very large sums of

money could you get care; the mainstream, common, poor person could not afford it. My grandmother would care for them so lovingly and go to their homes to make them a little more comfortable. I would frequently accompany her on those trips, first as a little boy, then as a bigger boy, and then as a grown man. Sometimes, she would take the patients home to us and care for them there. It became my goal to become a nurse, though an impossible one at the time when I graduated school. We were so lagged behind in the world of medical advancements. Only once we gained independence in 1991 did things really start to change, and the country started making progress. Then, I was able to enroll in Vaskivtsy Medical College and by 1994 I was a nurse. Nursing was different in Ukraine. With limited medicine, a nurse would often need to rely on common sense in an effort to try to give the right care. In 2009, I came to America with my wife and son, leaving the rest of my family behind. It was a hard decision but the right one. Seeing what is going on in Ukraine now, I am even more grateful than I was until now.

Are you in touch with family members in Ukraine?

Two of my brothers are fighting the war. They do not have much time to talk between one battle and the next, but they make sure to touch base with me, knowing that I am giving up my nights with so much worry. Their wives and children are in an area that is currently considered safe. Much as my brothers are pleading to them to leave Ukraine for safety, they would not agree. People need to understand this; Ukrainians love their country. Ukraine has been under Russia for years and it was a like a 3rd world country. Once it gained its independence, the country began to thrive. We are fighting for something. Many things.

How did you find the transition from Ukraine and the United States?

If you want to compare life in a Ukrainian village, to life in Brooklyn you may as well put together Antarctica and the Sahara. Every aspect of life was different. Integrating was challenging. It took more than 3 years for me to pass the initial evaluation, before I was allowed to take the NCLEX exam. For every American nurse it is horror, but for me, when I was still building my English vocabulary and I possessed limited knowledge of the American medical protocol, it was a steep climb. It took me a number of years to study, during which I worked as a home health aide. I did all the learning from books, myself. If I would join programs, it would cost money, money, and more money. It was not easy, but the goal was stronger right in front of my eyes. In the year, 2018. I finally held my license.

Did you ever use your nursing experience outside the walls of your job?

On an ordinary day in July, I used the Subway on my way home from work. I was preparing for a quiet ride to relax from a twelve-hour shift. Before I knew it, a Chinese woman sitting right beside me stretched on the floor in front of my feet. Everyone in the wagon ran off as far as they could from the site, but my nurse instinct was to go to the scene instead of shrinking away. I bent down to ask if she is okay. She was not responsive. Immediately, I had someone call 911, before starting CPR on her for long minutes until EMS arrived. It turned out that she suffers from heart failure, and she forgot to take her medication on that day. She is now alive and well and her husband got in touch me later to thank me profusely for saving her life.

Was there anything in nursing that surprised you that was different than expected?

I never noticed that the responsibility of a nurse is so tremendous! Every little thing you do, even like changing a diaper is on you to do it well, because those patients are vulnerable to easily catch infection. Also, every day, anything can happen, and it is on you to be vigilant and notice it because not always can the family even identify the symptoms. One day, I arrived to one of my patients who happens to be

in a stable condition, a true sweetheart. He looked odd. His color was a deep shade of blue, and when I checked his fever, a temperature of 104 confirmed that something is really wrong. I checked his oxygen, and it was frighteningly low, so I started ventilation with an Ambu bag and called 911. The mother told me that he has looked this way for only three hours, and I nearly freaked out! 3 hours! What a miracle that I came. EMS arrived and they did CPR for more than 25 minutes before he woke up. He is a healthy boy again and I am more attached to him than ever.

Do you have any message you would like to impart to nurses all over?

I will take the mike to thank you, guys, for being so brave and helping so many people during those unprecedented time. It shows just how amazing we always were!

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