



A Nurse First | Season 2, Episode 7

The sendoff

[Imelda Reyes]: I definitely didn't take a traditional route. I started off in nursing, and when I was in my undergraduate studies, there was a nursing school starting at my school. My goal was to work with people and to work within the medical field. And so I ended up applying to the nursing school, and I was in the first class. So I ended up going for a master's in Public Health. And while I was in my Public Health degree, I decided that I really wanted to join the Navy. So I was actually in healthcare finance, not doing any nursing, and I found myself at the end of the five years kind of thinking, "Is this really what I want to do for the rest of my life?"

[Welcome to A Nurse First. This is Imelda Reyes telling her own A Nurse First story.]

[Imelda Reyes]: I had talked to my commanding officer about getting out of the Navy, and he just thought I was making the wrong decision. He gave me a reflective project and told me to really look back at my favorite job and really help me determine where I wanted to go. And my favorite job was my job after nursing school where I worked with a migrant health center. We had migrants that came from Texas up to Michigan, and this migrant center provided the healthcare for the people that in the summer that would come up to take cucumbers and stuff like that. And so I was responsible for nine camps.

In Southwest Michigan, there were all these migrant camps where people lived, and they had one person, they were camp health aides that were kind of responsible for the camp. And I was responsible for the camp health aides and then the overall health of all of the camps. I had an opportunity to do a lot of outreach, and we would make sure kids were up to date with their immunizations, women were getting their OB care—anything that happened within the camps, we took care of. And I realized that nursing was really where I needed to be. So I went back and got my nurse practitioner degree and started working at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta where I was a Pediatric Nurse Practitioner, and I loved it.

Then I started precepting students, and I realized that I really liked teaching. When I got my first student, I was super scared because I thought I didn't know anything. And I was like, "Oh my gosh, this student's going to show up, and they're going to ask me questions, and I'm not going to know the answer to these things." But as I started precepting students, I realized they were super scared. They felt like they didn't know anything. I was so passionate about the care that I was providing to my patients that I got really excited when the student would say, "Oh my gosh, I really liked your approach, asking these history questions or the way that you taught this," or whatever. And then somebody mentioned, they're like, "Have you ever thought about teaching because you know so much, and your approach is really good." So then that's when I realized I was having an impact on that one student during the precepting experience, but I really wanted to have a bigger impact.

I ended up going back for my Doctor of Nursing Practice degree. My transition to teaching it was pretty smooth. I was fortunate in that I had one semester where I guest-lectured, and then this following semester I was teaching secondary to somebody else. And then the third semester I was the primary teacher, and she was my backup. That to me was invaluable because I was able to really kind of ease into the teaching role. That's not always everyone's experience, and people kind of have to jump in two feet first. I was able to teach things that I was passionate about, like pediatric wellness for instance, was my first class that I taught. And so it was something that I could teach without being too nervous because it was something I did day in and day out. So I've been a faculty member now for about 11 years, and I teach mostly at the graduate level.

[When the MSN program director job opened up at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Imelda jumped on the opportunity to switch coasts and further used the leadership skills she developed over the past decade.]

[Imelda Reyes]: Neither of my parents went to college. My mom finished sixth grade; my dad barely finished high school. And so just being able to work with students that one, look like me, two, might come from similar backgrounds was really a big draw to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Then they have the overall designation as a minority-serving institution. And so that to me really got to the core of me being a first-generation college student. I think of nurses who have doctorates, Latinas make up less than 1%. And so knowing that I'm one of them and that I can be there as a role model or as a resource to other students and I understand where they're coming from.

My first commencement at UNLV was really exciting. They have two different ceremonies. They have one for undergraduates, and then a graduate ceremony. I volunteered to be a Marshall, even though I was new to UNLV, the call came out and I just volunteered. And at my last institution, I just always thought the Marshall was a cool... Like, when you would go to graduation to see the person carrying the banner for the school, I just thought that was really neat. You are with the students that are graduating that day. I didn't realize how much bigger of a ceremony it kind of seemed like here. And so when I saw just the stadium and stuff like that, I was kind of like, "Oh. Now I know what I volunteered for."

Just being with the students and again, being part of something that's bigger I think is really a cool thing to do. There were two of us as faculty, and so we had a little snafu where she carried the banner, and I actually got to hood a student. I had the flag, and I saw the student and the other faculty member, and I were talking to her, and then we realized that generally the chair will hood the student. But there was an issue that was just unforeseen, and the chair couldn't be there. And so we both looked to each other and were like, "Well, somebody has to hood her!"

She volunteered to carry the flag. I volunteered to hood her, and so I got to know the student a little bit more. She told me about her project, and she was just so excited. She had her entire family there. And so we went up on stage, and they said her name, and we were able to hood her. There were thousands of people there, I think. And there were all the students from the different graduate colleges, and then all their families were kind of in the arena up above.

After the hooding of the student, I got to walk out with her, and I got to kind of see the faculty that were there for the graduation ceremony. I got to see the MSN students that had just finished as well.

Being at a new school, I thought it was really ... Seeing that Sigma connection was important, and I saw the chords that people were wearing. Everyone's funnels out and everyone's cheering everybody else on and yeah, it's a really exciting time. It was a really nice experience to be there for her.

[Your commanding officer in the Navy really changed the trajectory of your life with that one reflection exercise. Is this something you now use with your students?]

[Imelda Reyes]: Yeah, I actually do that quite a bit, and I get students all the time that say, "I'm not sure what I want to be." And I have them reflect back on to what gets them excited, because I'm a big believer that if you love your job, then it doesn't feel like you're going to a job every day. It's something that you can really enjoy.

[Will you be volunteering for any roles at UNLVs next graduation? If they asked you to give a speech, what advice would you give to students?]

[Imelda Reyes]: I'm just really looking forward to, I guess, participating in a similar way in that just being there for the students. And this time I plan to be one of the faculty alongside that kind of are cheering and being the cheerleader for them as they're walking out. And so I'm really looking forward to seeing the students walk across the stage. There, they get a stole, and they get their pins, seeing the diversity walk across the stage, know that, again, we're adding to what's needed out there in the nursing profession.

If I were to be at graduation and giving the speech, I would say always follow your passion. Always remember why you got into being a nurse. Don't forget the power that you hold, especially knowing that we're the most trusted profession out there. We are able to influence in such ways, just make sure that you recognize the power that you hold, and that you go out and do great things.

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