Tragedy Leads to a Nursing Career Dispensing Help and Hope

Barbara Semple-Cort remembers her greatest comfort during the last weeks of her mother's life came from being allowed to assist in her care: putting lotion on her arms, reading to her, giving her backrubs. Semple-Cort was only 13 when her mother suffered a broken neck and became a quadrapalegic. But the solace she found as a caregiver and the support she got from her mother's nurses determined her career path.

Today Semple-Cort is a nurse at Mount Sinai Rehabilitation Hospital in Hartford. Her skill and empathy for patients and their families is being recognized with a Nightingale Award for Excellence in Nursing. The statewide award program honors outstanding nurses at simultaneous banquets throughout the state. Semple-Cort will be recognized at a ceremony at the Harford Marriot on May 3.

Growing up in rural Guyana, Semple-Cort and her family used a small health care center that provided the community with services like vaccination and prenatal care. When her mother was hospitalized, Semple-Cort was awed by the care the nurses provided – for her mother and her. "They were very kind to me," she recalls, and even allowed the girl to stay long past visiting hours. She remembers how much it helped her to play a role in her mother's care and so encourages the families of her patients to do likewise.
"I always try to involve them," she says. "They are hungry to learn."

Stephen Rowan, Semple-Cort's nurse manager, says that he regularly receives letters from patients and families grateful for her care. One patient, for example, wrote about how Semple-Cort seemed to "anticipate my every need and was always able to find a cheerful way to improve my spirit and get me going again when I was down or not feeling well."

Semple-Cort enjoys working in rehabilitation because of the ongoing relationships she forms there. While typical hospital stays grow shorter and shorter, patients in rehabilitation are often admitted for three weeks. Semple-Cort works on a small unit with a lower patient load than a traditional hospital setting: two more factors that help her form strong bonds with patients and families.

Over those weeks, she sees transformations. Often people come in angry at having suffered a traumatic accident or stroke. Semple-Cort's message is simple: "Things can be better." Through teaching and therapy, patients begin to see that this is true.

Though she's made a life for herself in Connecticut – She's a Windsor resident – Semple-Cort has not forgotten her birthplace. She's part of the Fyrish-Courtland-Gibraltar Number One Support Group. Living along the east coast from Washington D.C. to Canada, they all hail from the same area of Guyana and have taken responsibility for the health and education of the children in their home region. Semple-Cort and her husband often commit to sponsor a child for a year so that the family can afford books and transportation to school. The group regularly sends supplies ranging from blood pressure cuffs to clothing.

She also acts as a mentor to new nurses at Mount Sinai, said Rowen, and never stops learning herself as she works hard to keep current with new technologies and therapies that can help her patients. She also active in work groups that look for ways to implement new practices to improve care. Though she's a leader among her colleagues, it's patient contact that Semple-Cort enjoys most. "Watching people go from not being able to help themselves to learning how they can live satisfying lives – that's what I like about my job," she says.