

## OPINION

Nickie Hill was motivated to become a licensed practical nurse after her 18-year-old stepson died from bacterial meningitis. STOCK.ADOBE.COM

# Tragedy-inspired leap of faith put my career back on track

BY NICKIE HILL

I could have saved him, I thought. I could have prevented him from dying.

That's what kept replaying in my head that day in the hospital — that I could have made a difference. Right then, I promised myself that from then on, I would.

Before that tragedy, I was a certified nursing assistant at a local medical facility. I routinely worked “doubles” — eight hours followed by another eight hours. I pulled the double shifts at least three days a week.

It was hard, and I got little sleep. But I had to pay the bills. This is my job, I told myself. I was 52 years old, and professionally, I had arrived at a dead end. But then our family ran into a medical disaster, and suddenly I felt

compelled to move forward.

My 18-year-old stepson, Damyles, was suffering migraine headaches. His pain got so bad that his mother took him to a nearby hospital emergency room.

That day, Damyles waited in the ER for eight hours to be seen. Damyles' mother, who didn't realize how long the wait would be, eventually had to go to work and left him there alone.

Finally, a physician examined Damyles and didn't find any serious signs. He sent Damyles home and told him to take Tylenol.

A few days later, Damyles went back to the ER with a throbbing headache and died. The cause, the staff later learned, was bacterial meningitis. The ER physician who first saw Damyles had missed the symptoms and misdiagnosed him. And now a teenager was dead.

If I had known the symptoms, I thought, I could have helped my stepson. Then the doctors and nurses would have treated him accordingly. Damyles would still be here now, I kept telling myself.

At that moment I decided to do what I had long intended to do. I had wanted to be a nurse ever since I was a little girl so I could take care of people. But I'd had to stop my training prematurely to start earning a paycheck. Now I could go back to nursing school for another degree and practice at a higher level.

If this is what God wants for me to do and be, I told myself, then I'm going to explore my options.

A potential answer came right away. I set up an appointment at Rockford Career College, a two-year vocational institution, and enrolled. This was meant to be.

For the next 14 months I buckled down on my studies. And the school went above and beyond to keep me moving in the right direction. One adviser, Taisha, even prayed with me.

I graduated over five months ago, passed the National Council Licensure Examination and obtained my license as a licensed practical nurse.

My new role at the Amberwood Care Center in Rockford is more hands-on. At the post-acute care facility, I monitor patient vital signs, change bandages and administer medications and other treatments. I keep patient records and help patients bathe and dress and perform basic daily activities. I report patient status to the health care team and advocate on their behalf.

I also earn more money and pull fewer doubles.

One of my patients is a 92-year-old dementia patient. He usually watches TV without saying a word or changing the expression on his face. Every time I go to his room to bring him his medicine, I smile at him and start a conversation. He always smiles back and asks me how I'm doing. That makes my day. It's proof that small touches make a big difference.

If my recent life has taught me anything, it's that the worst challenges can deliver the best opportunities.

In my new status as a nurse, my central purpose will be to honor my stepson, his life and his memory and to make sure that what happened to him never happens to anyone else.

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