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My Holistic Practice Has Healed Me

by TERRI McCORMICK RN, BSN, CHPN

I have worked in many settings and had many great experiences in the past 22 years that I have been a nurse. Over the years I have worked in telemetry, orthopedics, and thoroughly enjoyed working in the operating room. But my most fulfilling jobs have been in hospice nursing and home health. The rewards are many, and the losses necessary for growth.

My experience as a hospice nurse helped me more than anything else when I learned I was HIV positive. It was the scariest time in my life. I functioned on auto pilot and temporarily checked out of my head. I understood what it meant to have an illness that doesn't go away. The routine blood draws every three months still drive me crazy. The constant feelings of fear, depression and sadness challenged my psyche.

I developed a great compassion for anyone who suffers from a chronic illness or disease. My heart breaks when I see a person suffer in silence and anguish, knowing that he or she may not have support or love. I know how I feel and I *have* the support of a significant other who loves me, and the love of my friends and family. Out of this realization was born my need to pay it forward—to give back all that I have received.

People with HIV/AIDS often lack access to health care or are underserved. Regular challenges regarding health issues can prompt isolation and despair. We have feelings of loss, loneliness and sadness every day, and often need behavioral health services. There can be endless insurance battles. As long as I am healthy and have a voice, I will continue to speak out for those who cannot or will

not speak up for themselves. This holistic principle, “Acting as an advocate for the rights of and equitable distribution and access to health care for all persons, especially vulnerable populations,” has helped me find meaning and purpose in my life (AHNA, 2007, p. 37).

I decided to become involved in a local consumer advisory board at the HIV/AIDS clinic where I receive services in behavioral health. I began to see how I could divert my thoughts and feelings, and channel my energy in a positive direction. I joined the local faith-based HIV/AIDS network, eventually becoming a board member and volunteering my time to tell my story to others. I became a member of the HIV/AIDS consortium to learn how my community distributes funds to serve people living with HIV/AIDS and to have a voice in how that

is done. I began to ask questions and started to learn about the federally funded Ryan White Program.

The Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA) estimates that more than half a million people receive at least one medical, health or related support service through this program each year (HRSA, n.d.). It is the payer of last resort, as people on Ryan White funding usually have no other source of insurance coverage. Ryan White Programs are a critical part of this nation's response to HIV/AIDS, providing care and treatment to those with greatest need. This program is often the only lifeline a person with HIV/AIDS has to HIV care, treatment and support services. 1990 was the initial year Congress started the Ryan White Program and it was reauthorized by Congress in 1996, 2000 and 2006. At the end of October, Congress will decide whether to extend or allow the Ryan White Program's continuation or expiration.

In March of this year, I was one of 30 women that began the Consumer Leadership Corps training program sponsored by the AIDS Alliance, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of women, children, youth and families living with HIV/AIDS. I traveled to Washington, D.C. and spent a week in training, learning the information I would need to provide community workshops on a number of topics. The women I met at my training for the AIDS Alliance helped to show me that, despite adversity, we can be important and empowered individuals worthy of love, respect and dignity.

This past May, I traveled to Arlington, Va., and attended the AIDS Alliance annual conference. I met many wonderful people who have dedicated their lives to help those with HIV/AIDS. I also met with Senator McCain's health correspondent on Capitol Hill. I discussed the need for a national AIDS strategy of reducing the incidence of HIV/AIDS, eliminating health disparity, and getting routine care for HIV patients. According to the Centers for Disease Control, one person is infected with HIV every nine-and-a-half minutes (www.nineandahalfminutes.org).

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I recently traveled to Kansas City, Mo., for ambassador training for the National Health Services Corps (NHSC). The NHSC was established to improve the health of underserved communities and vulnerable populations by coordinating the recruitment and retention of caring health professionals dedicated to making a difference in the lives of those who do not have access to basic healthcare services. Nearly 64 million Americans lack adequate access to primary health care; plus there are approximately 7,000 vacancies of primary care providers on the NHSC job opportunities

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list (HRSA, 2009). The NHSC has connected some 28,000 primary care professionals with careers in underserved communities through its listing of available clinical opportunities through scholarships and loan repayment programs (HRSA, 2008). With the number of chronically ill people in this country and the rising costs of health care, we all—especially holistic nurses—need to advocate for primary care education, training and funding.

On a personal level, I want to thank the people at El Rio Special Immunology Associates for helping me with my mental

health. I want to thank the Department of Infectious Disease at University Medical Center in Tucson, Ariz., for the excellent medical care I receive. I want to thank the people at Tucson Interfaith HIV/AIDS network for accepting me and allowing me to tell my story. I especially want to thank the AIDS Alliance for giving me the opportunity to travel and obtain education that can help others. Finally, I want to thank my friends and family, and all the patients that I serve in my work and in my volunteer efforts. Thank you for the rewards and the lessons.

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Terri McCormick RN, BSN, CHPN has worked in health care her whole life, and currently works as a home health nurse. She started as a candy stripper and became a Certified Nursing Assistant at age 21. She trained to become an emergency medical technician at the age of 23 and an RN at 24, eventually obtaining her BSN. She will graduate with a legal nurse consulting degree this year, and in the future she will begin the Family Nurse Practitioner Program at the University of Phoenix with the goal of becoming certified in HIV/AIDS. She also volunteers for the AIDS Alliance of Washington, D.C., by way of Tucson, Ariz.