

‘Speech pathologist assists locals with disorders



Jessica Meditz, June 30, 2022

Whitney Thomas, 34, a speech-language pathologist living in Downtown Brooklyn, was originally on track to pursue nursing.

However, she learned about speech pathology during her time in college at Ohio State University, when she had a family member who suffered from a brain injury.

She attended some of his sessions, and quickly became intrigued by the field from seeing the improvement and growth in her relative’s communication skills.

“I became very intrigued, and started doing more research into the field. Speech therapy covers so many areas, not just communicating... It was also, of course, working with children who stutter, in hospitals with adults who had strokes, and voice patients,” Thomas said.

Thomas works for VNS Health, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the health and well-being of people through high-quality, cost-effective health care in the home and community.

Her work with VNS Health entails interacting with patients 18 and up, and sometimes children on a case-by-case basis, primarily in the Southern Queens communities of Jamaica, the Rockaways, Queens Village, and Richmond Hill.

She engages with folks in an intimate way by entering their homes and working with them in a space that’s familiar and comfortable for them.

“I think that a lot of times, you become part of the family,” Thomas said. “I have a patient who I worked with for several months because she had cancer, and I really enjoyed coming to see her every week.”

“Her family was always excited to see me, and when she had success, they were just so excited to update me on her progress... Even months later, they still keep in contact with me to tell me how she’s doing and send pictures,” she continued. “I like that you really get to know people and their family members.”

Thomas assists people with speaking, cognitive, and swallowing issues caused by cancer, stroke, Parkinson’s, traumatic injuries, and aphasia, a language disorder that impacts a person’s communication skills, among many other conditions.

While there are about 46 million people in the U.S. who have communication and swallowing disorders, Thomas feels that they are extremely underrepresented in society.

“For example, most people have never even heard of aphasia, which is a big one because it’s very typical after having a stroke,” she said. “I think Bruce Willis was recently diagnosed with aphasia, which was actually really helpful in spreading awareness for the disorder.”

She cited Muhammad Ali as a famous example of someone with Parkinson’s disease who had difficulty with speech.

Despite the lack of representation, as well as other obstacles like the COVID-19 pandemic and the stress of managing cases,

Thomas said that she is passionate about her career, enjoys serving the community and gaining more knowledge on a daily basis.

“I’m someone who gets bored easily, so I like being in a career that allows me to always grow or learn new things, which is something I appreciate,” she added.

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