

After 40 Years of Nursing, Woman Looks to Take Care of Family



Martin Wilbur, March 02, 2023

Among the unsung heroes of healthcare in this era, or really any generation, are the nurses who provide the necessary care and comfort for countless patients.

Betty Velez, a 35-year Yorktown resident, has been answering the calls for more than 40 years. Most of that time has been with VNS Health as a home health nurse, making sure that her patients, many of whom are among the neediest seniors, receive the care and attention they need and deserve.

Among the most common care is binding up wounds, giving the patients their injections, monitoring their heart and lungs and seeing how people who may have broken a bone are healing.

“It’s enormously gratifying,” said Velez whose official title is clinical specialist, Contact Center. “My husband used to say you’re happiest when you get up and leave in the morning because I really felt fulfilled and rewarded. I feel like I have faith in life by teaching people how to call the doctor, when it’s urgent, when it’s

not urgent, things of that nature, and there isn't anything more rewarding than helping someone in need, and that's what I did every day."

These are the final weeks of Velez's career. At 66, Velez has decided to leave the daily grind behind and retire, and as much as she loves her work, it's time to devote her love and energies to her family – her husband, three children and five grandchildren.

Velez, who grew up in the Bronx, comes from a family who all chose careers where they can make a difference and serve others. Her mother served as a nurse's aide at the VA hospital. Her oldest son is an NYPD sergeant while her daughter is a paramedic with the Westchester County Department of Emergency Services. Her youngest, another son, followed in her footsteps as a registered nurse.

Other extended family have ventured into similar fields, work where there's always a need but also where you receive the satisfaction of making other people's lives better.

"There's job security, I mean that's important, but what the primary, I think the primary thing was the satisfaction you get from the job," Velez said.

At 17, Velez graduated as a licensed practical nurse, so it made sense to go to college to become a registered nurse. A graduate of Lehman College, she spent a few early years at Bronx Lebanon Hospital, where she rose to head nurse. But even four decades ago, staffing shortages were problematic and Velez decided to find work elsewhere.

"It's not easy. It's a lot of rules, regulations," Velez said. "You have to know the whole human body, not as much as an MD, of course, but pretty much. Some people don't make it and some people have to take the exam more than once."

Instead, she switched to home care and began working for what is now called VNS Health.

Even after moving to Yorktown, Velez would commute each working day down to the Bronx and travel from residence to residence for eight-hour shifts taking care of those who needed home nursing.

The number of patients receiving home health care has exploded during her career. Today, about 43,000 patients are in the care of VNS Health in New York City, Long Island and Westchester.

"When I first started, patients stayed in the hospital; they didn't go home early at all," Velez said. "But when insurance changed to the way it is, managed care, people started going home earlier and earlier."

Today, some procedures and treatments that a generation or two ago would land someone in the hospital for days, are now treated on an outpatient basis, she said.

Her career has also seen two dramatic health crises – the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic is fresh in everyone's minds, Velez said the healthcare industry learned relatively quickly what needed to be done to slow transmission

But there was so much confusion about the cause and spread of AIDS and how to protect oneself.

“That was a scary time. People didn’t know much about it. It took a long time for the public to be well-informed,” Velez said. “That shook us more than COVID because of the lack of education.”

With her pending retirement in March, Velez’s skills will be needed at home. Her husband is disabled, so she will be able to provide around-the-clock care for him. She’ll devote the rest of her energy to her grandchildren and cooking.

“There’s a lot of sacrifices you make working all the time,” Velez said. “Now it’s my turn and that’s what I plan, to enjoy my grandkids.”.

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