

The "Reflections" column features human interest stories about life-changing experiences with patients or other nursing school experiences. Send your query letter to nsna@nsna.org att: Managing editor.

Through the Eyes (and Hands) of a Latina Nursing Student

By Claudia Swanson

Latinos are often known for their warmth, hospitality, religiosity, sociability and especially for being physically affectionate, right? As an Argentinean, I fall into this stereotype. Regardless of labels such as one's ethnicity, these attributes are on each patient's wish list of personal qualities to be found in the healthcare provider at their bedside. For that reason, I consider my origins to be of particular value as I pursue a nursing career.

Having successfully completed my first semester of instruction, I was now ready for the excitement of the clinical setting.

My story begins on the telemetry floor. During my preparatory semester I had dreamed of something more dynamic, surgical, obstetric, dramatic, or glamorous as the first clinical experience. "*Old people?*" I think as I begin to succumb to stereotypes of other people. I love them, but I don't want to spend my entire shift changing diapers. With four kids, I've been there and done that. Besides, geriatrics is bound to be depressing. I want fast, dramatic results, not to just watch the inevitable unfold. Nothing short of "fixing" patients would matter anyway.

But it's too late. Patients were assigned during pre-conference, and I find myself on my way to a fragile and sleepy 90-year-old woman – lying in her bed as if waiting alone at the train station, her baggage in tow and her one-way ticket in hand.

But shift happens.

I could sadly watch her lonely figure from a distance as I fill out endless paperwork. Instead, I climb onto that train platform and softly approach her. Surprisingly, she rises from her slumber to the touch of my gloved hand, and although legally blind, she seeks eye contact or perhaps any connection at all. I turn up the volume to introduce myself, as she is almost deaf, and I do not think she gets my name, the fact that I'm a student, or even that I'm a woman. But I sense that those are trivial details for her, starved as she is for human contact.

A powerful force compels me to gently touch her, and I almost want to hug her. Reflexively, like wincing at the sight of a child in pain, my hands begin to stroke her frail body. I carefully hold her bruised hand, and then take a few minutes combing her hair, caressing her emaciated arm, and finally massaging her dry, numb feet with lotion. I'm caught in the moment, aware of the luxury of time that is afforded to me as a student. In a hectic environment, this is a one-time only opportunity that I cannot pass up.

So I don't.

With surprising energy, Pauline starts to sleep less and talk more, sharing with me stories about her life, about her two divorced sons who live up north, and her beloved ex-daughter-in-law who spent two weeks caring for her recently. She reminisces about the simplest things she misses like drinking water, and being able to eat in the cafeteria with her devoted husband of 68 years.

As I wash her hair, she suddenly pauses to tell me that it was time for her to go. Being fed through a PEG tube is no life for her anymore.

I choke up and realize that perhaps she's talking to herself rather than to me, as if taking stock of her own life in my presence. What a privileged position I'm in, among only a few witnesses to this beautiful film's final scenes. I leave Pauline sleeping peacefully.

Soon it's time for me to go home. Wistfully, I approach her room to say goodbye, and I'm delighted to find her 92-year-old husband and her son at her bedside. They smile as I enter the room, eager to tell me that she has been talking to them about me and what a good day she is having. "She hasn't looked this pretty in a long time," her husband says. They ask me if I will return the next day. I explain that I'm a student and will not be back until the following Saturday.

They seem disappointed, but I realize that I have already made a difference. It crosses my mind that when it comes to therapeutic touch, perhaps I might just have the upper hand after all. ☺