Back Where It Began

By Kendra Y. Mims, ENA Connection

Emily Carle recalls spending the majority of her childhood near Portland, Maine, in hospitals and busy waiting rooms with her parents while her brother battled cancer. By age 13, she learned from a staff nurse about neutropenic precautions and how to properly apply gowns, masks and gloves. Hospitals had become her home, and the staff became family.

“I didn’t have a typical childhood,” said Carle, BS, EMT-B, now 31. “I never had the opportunity to sit at home and play with dolls or sit around the kitchen table for a Sunday night dinner with my family. I was inundated with emergencies, diseases and hospitals. I watched my brother receive an autologous stem cell transplant when I was in grade school.”

Her turning point came during her junior year in high school. While her classmates filled out college applications, Carle’s life came to a halt when her father became ill as a result of pulmonary arterial hypertension and she found herself back in the hospital during his final days.

“Choosing a college is a coming-of-age moment for a teenager, and instead of experiencing that moment, I was sitting beside a bed holding my father’s hand and deciding if I should take him off of life support,” she said. “I was back home … back in a hospital, back at a bedside letting go of a hand I loved.”

After losing her dad and learning she also could inherit PAH, Carle escaped her grief and fear by going away to college and avoiding the healthcare field because of her experiences with hospitals.

“I spent a lot of time growing up in the caretaker role, and I honestly didn’t want to be a nurse,” she said. “I didn’t want anything more to do with healthcare. I traveled the world, studied abroad, and for a while I ran from my past, childhood and personal experiences … until one day my suitcase became unpacked and I realized the thing missing was what my heart knew best, which was nursing.”

Carle had a career epiphany during her first medical mission trip to the Rio Dulce jungle in Guatemala with her church in 2007. After wearing a bandana and scrubs for 10 days and using her basic first-aid training to help patients being treated for emergencies, she was motivated to become a wilderness first responder. She eventually joined a search and rescue team, enrolled in an EMT class and worked in Aurora, Colo., with Rural Metro until 2011.

“The mission trip had offered me a zest for adventure and a new kind of medicine that I hadn’t been exposed to,” Carle said. “It made me realize that I could combine my love of the outdoors, traveling, helping others and even medicine into the calling that I had innately been crafted for. It was during my time in Colorado [as an EMT] that I realized everything happens for a reason and God truly had a plan for my life: nursing.”

New Beginnings

With her newfound passion and drive, Carle moved back to Maine, became an ED technician at Mercy Hospital in Portland and enrolled in a nursing program in 2012. As she pursued her nursing degree, her colleagues encouraged her to apply for an ENA Foundation scholarship. Carle received the ENA Foundation Non-RN Scholarship for Emergency Department Employees in 2014 and is thankful to the ENA Foundation for providing a means to help nurses pursue their educational goals.

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EMILY CARLE, BS, EMT-B

Although Carle says she stumbled into
emergency nursing after years of running away from it, she believes her past and personal experiences have prepared her.

“As much as I miss my dad dearly, I know that my past has crafted passion and shaped me for today,” she said. “I recognize the effect of the disease on the patient and family because I’ve been there. I aspire to care in holistic essence and [see it as a] privilege being part of that vulnerable experience, not just for the person lying in the bed, but for all affected by that experience.”

Carle hopes to flourish, not only as an emergency nurse but as an advocate specifically for genetic diseases, epigenetics and patient- and family-centered care. She wants to use her personal experiences to empower others and pay it forward.

“I feel touched and honored to receive this ENA Foundation scholarship and to share my story,” she said. “This scholarship is more than a financial gift. It is a blessing and accolade to spur me onward in my achievements, pursuits and to be further molded for a greater purpose.

“I make it a life motto to be a steward in all that I do. I have to know that my hands truly are a steward’s hands, and I need to appreciate and honor what my hands are capable of doing. I once let go of my father’s hand … but I did so because although I lost him, I knew I had other hands I would need to hold.”

For more information on how you can help advance the emergency nursing profession and support your colleagues, please visit www.enafoundation.org.