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**Partners in Caring
Columbia Gorge Community College Nursing Program
Partners with Hospice of The Gorge**

By Lori Russell

Oregon’s population is getting older. By 2025, more than one million of the state’s residents will have passed the 65-year mark. Some of those are the very people who care for the health needs of an aging population—nurses. Studies predict that as large numbers of nurses retire or leave the profession over the next several years, Oregon could have 5,000 fewer nurses than it needs.

Nursing shortages are not a new phenomenon. The demand for trained nurses has exceeded the supply about every ten years since the early 1980s. Yet, unlike the shortages of years past which were partially a sign of the expanding career opportunities for women, the current shortage reflects both an aging workforce and the difficulty of retaining nurses of working age.

Rural areas are especially affected, says Gretchen Hagen, RN, Executive Director of Hospice of the Gorge. “It is difficult to draw qualified nurses from outside the area because there aren’t as many job options as there are in large cities and nurses can’t make the same money they can somewhere else.”

Instead of looking for answers outside the region, Hagen’s agency along with other healthcare providers have teamed up with educators at Columbia Gorge Community College (CGCC) to train a new generation of nurses, many of whom already live in the Mid-Columbia.

One of 21 nursing schools in Oregon, CGCC accepts 24 students into its two-year program each fall.

“Our program developed from the needs in the community,” says Marilyn McGuire-Sessions, Director of Nursing and Health Care Occupations. “One example was the need for licensed practical nurses at the local longterm care facilities. We decided to develop a ladder program that allows students to sit for the national exam for licensed practical nurses after their first year and for their RN exam after the second year.”

CGCC benefits from its many community partnerships throughout the Gorge. Healthcare providers—from hospitals and longterm care facilities to hospices and home health agencies—provide clinical placements for nursing students. Mid-Columbia Medical Center and Providence Hood River Hospital also provide in-kind clinical instructors.

“The most important part of nursing education is the clinical experience because it teaches students how to apply the knowledge and skills that they learn in the classroom,” says McGuire-Sessions.

Hospice of The Gorge became CGCC’s first community-based clinical site three years ago when it invited students to accompany its staff nurses on home visits. Soon after, it added semester-long clinical preceptorships in The Dalles and Hood River for those seeking an in-depth study of end-of-life issues.

“In a community like ours, we want to foster and support the community college program,” says Hagen. “We want the students to come and learn about hospice.”

“Hospice is invariably one of the highlights of the student’s observations,” says McGuire-Sessions, herself a former nurse for Hospice of The Gorge. “Some go into it with the impression that end-of-life care will be a downer, but there is joyousness to much of what hospice does. It changes one’s perspective from cure to care and offers a wonderful way to learn about the impact of the smaller transitions we all encounter throughout our lives. It can change not only your work, but the rest of your life.”

Agencies like Hospice of the Gorge not only help the next generation of nurses train for their future, they benefit when those students graduate and begin looking for jobs.

Hospice nurses Pat Lesich and Kasey Schneider, are both graduates of the CGCC program. Lesich came to the profession by way of the aluminum industry. After The Dalles smelter shut down in 2000, he began searching for a career that he could enjoy until retirement. “I looked in the Oregonian for jobs and every day there was something about the need for nurses,” he says. While Lesich says he had no idea what he was getting into when he applied to nursing school, now with three years of experience working in hospitals and longterm care facilities, he’s happy with his second career choice and his decision to join Hospice of The Gorge.



Marilyn McGuire-Sessions behind the controls in the simulation lab at CGCC where students prepare for their clinical placements by practicing their skills on computer-operated mannequins

Schneider worked in a variety of healthcare jobs before applying to the CGCC nursing program. While her interest in hospice was piqued during her student training, she accepted a job on a medical/surgical floor at a local hospital after graduating last June. “We were told you had to have one to two years experience in an acute care setting before you could get a job in the community agency like hospice,” she says.

“Hospice nursing is a very independent job that requires good nursing judgment,” says Hagen. While hiring nurses with previous hospice or acute care experience is easier, there are other important qualities that need to be considered. “If someone has a love for a particular type of nursing, it should be encouraged. I look for the willingness and the interest to care for people at the end of life. I want someone who knows what their strengths and weaknesses are, who can follow their instincts and carry a task through from beginning to end. We are very lucky to have found in Pat and Kasey nurses who have a lot of life experience in addition to their clinical skills.

“For a new grad, the team approach at Hospice is very important,” says Schneider. “From the medical directors to the more seasoned nurses, there is always someone you can call with a question.”

“The team really cares for its own,” says Lesich. “Bereavement services are available to staff as well as patients’ family members. When someone dies, the nurses need closure, too.”

Both Schneider and Lesich say the patient load and flexible schedule at Hospice adds to their job satisfaction. “Working nights at the hospital, I had five to seven patients,” says Schneider. “At Hospice, I have eight, but I have days to see them all, not just hours.”

Lesich who was accustomed to overseeing up to 27 patients during a 12-hour shift at a long-term care facility, says by seeing fewer patients he has more time to consider and carry out the best plan of care for each of them. “I love going into a home and making a positive difference.”

Hospice of the Gorge is a team of health care professionals dedicated to bringing help and hope to people suffering from the changes in life that matter most. It is a non-profit organization that has been helping people with end-of-life needs and related challenges since 1981. The oldest and largest hospice in the region, Hospice of The Gorges serves eight mid-Columbia counties, including Hood River, Wasco, Sherman, Gilliam, Morrow, Wheeler, Skamania and Klickitat. Please go to <http://www.hospiceofthegorge.org> for more information.



Hospice of the Gorge nurses Kasey Schneider, RN (seated) and Pat Lesich, RN (standing right) with Lorie Saito, RN, CGCC nursing instructor.



Marilyn McGuire-Sessions with computer-simulation mannequin that CGCC students use to learn clinical scenario.