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Pediatric Simulation Experience Highlights Critical Thinking and Analytical Skills

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Abby Garlock knows the value of collaboration. As a nurse in several wards at Cleveland Regional Medical Center for nearly a decade, she also understands the value of critical thinking skills and a nurse's ability to respond quickly and appropriately in any situation.

Garlock now serves as the lab coordinator for the Gardner-Webb University School of Nursing. She and her team recently established a brand new training curriculum to give nursing students a chance for some hands on experience with children and caregivers in an emergent care setting. "In some of the feedback we received relating to the clinical rotations, there were concerns with the pediatric clinical," Garlock shared. "Student nurses saw a lot of babies being born and took care of a lot of moms, but in this particular area, they didn't get a lot of pediatric experience.

As the idea for a pediatric simulation was being discussed, it was an offhand comment that set the wheels in motion for collaboration with the GWU theatre department. "Someone mentioned that we could get actors to play the role of the parents in the simulation," Garlock said. "As I tossed around that idea, it seemed to just line up exactly with what our goal was." She reached out to the theatre department and within days, she had a volunteer who could commit to the six-week project.

Actress and volunteer Courtney Butler, a GWU graduate student, was excited about an unscripted performance opportunity, but she was initially hesitant because she didn't know much nursing terminology. Garlock wasn't fazed. "I told her that was perfect, because a parent isn't going to know medical terminology," she said. "The students need to learn that when they talk to parents or patients, they need to speak on their level. So that worked out great."

During the simulation, Butler played the part of a parent distraught because her infant son was unresponsive. She begged the nurses to tell her what was happening to her child. She yelled at them when they didn't get the IV started on the first stick. She panicked when things weren't going well and she elevated the performance to crying and hysterics. "I just tried to give them real reactions to the situations, how it might really be in an emergency room," said Butler. "They don't know me; I'm a stranger to them. It gives us a better chance to make the simulation realistic."

Butler's portrayal certainly rattled the students as they attempted to provide care to the patients [children and infants in the simulation were programmable practice dummies]. Leigh Ann Hayes is a second year nursing student, and she said the exercise was extremely realistic. "I felt very agitated at one point," Hayes recalled. "But after I was able to look at the protocol orders and see what I needed to be doing, that helped me to get my focus back where it needed to be."

Hayes said simulations like this one are giving her confidence in what she has learned at Gardner-Webb. "This showed me that we really are being prepared for every situation that we could face," she revealed. "This really helped us stay on our game, because if you let your defenses down, you can't offer the best care. This is one of the best clinical experiences we've had. We got hands on experience and actually treated the patients ourselves."

Overall, the exercise was beneficial not only to the students, but also to their instructors. "I think it has been good for me as the lab coordinator to see how the students are thinking," Garlock shared. "I've definitely gained a better understanding of why they are doing what they do. Overall, I was impressed with their critical thinking abilities. That's mostly what nursing is about—being able to think critically and apply your skills based on what you've uncovered."