

Gail – Story of a Nursing Home CNA, Norridgewock



My name is Gail, and I have been a CNA in a wonderful nursing home for the past 11 years. I started as a nurse's aide for 6 years at Skowhegan Hospital when I first got out of high school, but I stopped to be a stay-at-home mother. Now my kids are grown and I'm back. It's my calling, I guess.

Since I was very young I knew I wanted to be in some kind of nursing. I chose to be a nurse's aide because I like the hands-on patient care – I didn't want to be an RN and have to worry about doctors and telephones and medications and all that. I just want to take care of people. I look at it as my gift from God. Some people know they want to be a musician, or an artist – I seem to be a natural caregiver.

But it's not an easy job. It's very strenuous – a lot of aide's knees and shoulders give out. I can't work the big floors anymore because I have bursitis in both shoulders. I need cortisone shots and I can't raise my arms up above my head without real pain. Just giving someone her morning bath – getting her night clothes off, giving her a bath, then getting her dressed and back in her chair is an aerobic workout. You wind up dripping with sweat, all hot and tired from the one person. And you've got 8 people to get up by 7:30 for breakfast!

People just plain quit and go to Wal-Mart or somewhere they can earn more money and it's less stressful ...

It can be emotionally draining, too.

Still, it's not a job that many people see as valuable. We don't get paid much, and it's hard to get health insurance. My husband works at the mill, so we have a good family plan through him. But a lot of the girls I work with, they can't afford any kind of insurance. If you only have so much money, you have to eat first and have a place to live, so some are just going on a wing and a prayer, hoping they don't become sick or get injured. They're not doing any preventative-type medicine to avoid it, and so a lot of them do get sick. It can be a disaster – especially for the single mothers.

Lots of people become tired, so they call out. People just plain quit and go to Wal-Mart or somewhere they can earn more money and it's less stressful. Some people just get oriented and they're gone. Usually we end up short of help. One night you think you have a pretty good crew, and then they say, 'We have to drop down to [state-minimum staffing levels],' and somebody is taken to another floor because that floor is totally destitute. Nights like that you keep the residents safe, nourish them, give them fluids. But as far as spending one-on-one time with them, which is also necessary, well...I once calculated that, after taking care of immediate necessities like eating and bathing, I have about 7 minutes per resident for all the rest of their needs. And that's only if nothing goes wrong.

I believe that when Jesus went back up to Heaven, He left us here to do His work. Our hands should be His hands, our feet are supposed to be His feet. And a nursing home is a great place to do that. But we need help. People need to be able to make a living and stay healthy doing this job or else, when it comes time that I need the care, I worry there won't be anyone there.

To learn more about the Kennebec Valley Organization (KVO), and its campaign to improve long-term care for workers, consumers, and families in the Valley, contact us at 873-5844 or kvo@gwi.net, or visit www.kvorg.org.