

Reckoning With Racism in Nursing

Alexandria Jones-Patten Transcript

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We're addressing racism in nursing.

My name is Alexandria Jones-Patten. I identify as an African American woman. I am four years almost into my nursing profession or career, I should say.

When my grandmother was sick with cancer, I was about six years old. And although I was really trying to understand what was going on with her and I saw how sad my family was, I was really interested in the medicine behind it. And the time that she was spending her final days with us and really what that looked like and why these things were happening.

So even though there was no one immediately in my family, at the time who was in medicine or in nursing or in any part of health care that I'm aware of, I took an interest in trying to understand the body and how it works and you know, why things happen the way that they do. My high school, I'm from Portland, Oregon, my high school offered a certified nursing assistant program.

So I graduated from there with my nursing license or excuse me, my nursing assistant certification and from there I went on to college and took a side street and looked at fields other than nursing and other than medicine. At the time, So my first degree is in human development and family studies. And so with that degree I ended up being a preschool teacher for a couple of years, but it just wasn't the passion I was going to apply to nursing school and I was going to retake all of those science classes that scared the daylights out of me.

And I was going to take them until I passed them and I was going to go to nursing school. And that's exactly what happened. It took about two years to get the prerequisite work done. And to apply. And thankfully I had one school out of about five that I applied to that said, OK, we'll give you a chance and that's how I moved to Los Angeles, and I got my master's in nursing from Charles Sturt University and I've been a nurse almost four years now.

And when I graduated I saw like a completely different world because I was working at a number of different community hospitals and oftentimes I was the only black nurse on the floor and that started the you really started to see that you had to work in certain hospitals if you weren't going to be the only person of of color I can still remember patients and patient families assuming that I was the CNA.

I can still remember physicians when they saw me off of the phone calls wondering knowing who I was, even if I said who I was and that I had called them earlier that morning for a medication or lab result or something pertinent. That feeling of, OK, is it because they don't know me because I'm new or they weren't expecting to see me?

If I look around the floor, if I look around the patients, the patient population that I'm taking care of, if I look around the nursing staff and you're on a team of people per shift and you're one of one, or if you're lucky, one of two or three, the notion that I shouldn't be the nurse is what I often felt or surprise at least that I was the nurse You remember hearing patients or patient families saying for example, I wanted a nurse of this race.

You'll never forget physicians who never seem to remember who you are, no matter how many times you physically encounter them face to face. You'll never forget that feeling of Do I belong? And one of the things I had to recognize is that Los Angeles and Southern California, we are a melting pot of cultures. And it's really tough to step out of a geographic area where you see many people who look like you and go to work somewhere else.

You also have to be assertive in being present and letting people know that you are there to work and you are a critical piece of the group of the team, and I practice selfcare as much as I possibly can. Some of the harmful looks or comments that come your direction, you need to be able to let that bounce off of you.

And so things where I am just carefree after my shift is important beyond sleep you know, retail therapy is amazing.

Find a support system and a support system. Who will take you from the studies when you're doing too much? Find a support system that will make you laugh when you're ready to cry because the intake of the excess amount of information being thrown at you is just too much. Find a group of people who you can study with, who you can seriously rely on to help you through the program.

You can't do it by yourself. Nursing is very much a team based science and you can't do it by yourself. You need people around you to build you up through the hard times. But nursing school is temporary. And that license is forever. So go and do what you need to do, but get the support system around you and that will increase your likelihood of getting through the program successfully.

Well, I think we have to look outside of nursing and when you turn on your TVs right now, we're seeing black and brown children, young adults being taken down and we're also seeing and hearing politicians say there's no such thing as systemic racism, there's no such thing as racism in this country, that America is not racist when we can sit down and have an honest conversation about some of these feelings and some of these notions, even the unconscious ones, then I think we'll be able to make more headway with being open to seeing people who don't look like the majority.

It's going to take some time. I encourage people to look at organizations with nurses who look like them. National Black Nurses Association is a great place to start. In my professional and personal opinion. But beyond that, you have to look for people who emulate who you want to be. And once you do that, you see that the doors that you are looking to have opened, they can open.

You just have to stay on track. And eventually you will have enough people, regardless of race, who will see you for what you are worth and what you bring to this profession. And that's going to be enough. Prayerfully, that will be enough. One day I want to get to this place where we're no longer having to worry about color and whether or not color defines one's ability to be a nurse, to be a good nurse, to be a quality nurse, to be a nurse leader, to be an educated, masters, Ph.D. prepared researcher, prepared DNP nurse.

I pray for the day where we're not having these conversations anymore and it's no longer a oh, my goodness, I can't believe she or he. This person of color made it this far and climb the ladder this high. I pray for the days where we can have more open dialog about reducing the stigma of being a person of color in such a prestigious yet less diverse workforce that is nursing.