

PHOTO: BARRINGTON 220 SCHOOL DISTRICT



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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LEFT: Dr. Tom Leonard congratulates Countryside Elementary School nurse, Mary Anne Wesoloski, who received the distinguished "Excellence in Pediatric Care" Award in May.

## School Nurses: Entertaining Angels Unaware

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER, or at least my first recollection of an encounter with nurses, came with an injury to my younger brother when we were kids. Bob – or Bobby as we called him then – was playing in the basement of our Niles home when he climbed up onto a utility sink and fell backwards, striking his head against the concrete floor. The force knocked him unconscious and caused a small gash at the base of his skull.

I have vivid memories of my mom scooping up my 4-year-old brother and quickly directing my sister and me to get in the car. Mom drove swiftly to

the hospital as my brother lay motionless next to my sister and me. Once we arrived at Lutheran General, emergency personnel whisked him away.

The next time I saw Bobby, he was still unresponsive, lying in a hospital bed. All of this was new to me. Like my brother, I was constantly getting hurt, but none of my injuries had resulted in a visit to this strange environment. While our family stood on the edges of the room, two nurses hovered over my little brother. As he slowly regained consciousness, he looked up at these strangers dressed in white and quietly asked, "Are you angels?" Mom sighed with

relief: my brother would be okay. She moved closer with tears in her eyes and embraced Bobby. The two "angels" gave her space and let her do what mothers do best.

As I reflect on that experience, while my brother was technically confused coming out of his daze, in many ways I believe he used the perfect term, "angels," for those who choose nursing as a vocation. I have been blessed with good health. Like most of us, however, I sometimes need the assistance of nurses both in and out of the hospital. When we are hurting, sick or possibly in an upsetting place, it is often a nurse who provides the comfort we need.

In Barrington 220, we are fortunate to have many talented and dedicated professional nurses taking care of our children and staff. With over 9,000 students and another 1,250 employees – many of whom occasionally run around a bit faster than we might wish – stuff does happen and injuries do occur.

### Our own first responders

School nurses are often the first responders to those cuts and scrapes that seem to appear when hundreds of youth gather in one place

(i.e. the playground). They tend to the 5-year-old girl who has tears in her eyes after a scraped knee suffered while chasing a ball during recess. Likewise, they and our athletic trainers comfort the 18-year-old track star, also with tears in his eyes, who has broken his ankle after colliding with a hurdle. Their knowledge, expertise and immediate attention can be the difference between an injury becoming worse, more traumatic or being remembered as a “little nothing.”

However, it does not stop there. Our school nurses and medical staff are also the keepers of medications for a large population. They know exactly who takes what, when and under which circumstances. They work closely with parents and special services teachers to ensure we have current information on the needs of every student. Many Barrington 220 children have allergies, some of which are quite severe, so exposure to bee stings or the ingestion of a certain food product can mean administering a life-saving prescription within minutes of the event. New state laws and recently adopted board of education policies allow us to have EpiPen auto-injectors available should a dangerous undiagnosed allergic reaction occur. In the event of a critical situation, our nurses are prepared to react instantaneously and instinctively to stabilize a child or staff member until paramedics arrive.

Every year, more than 86,000 students and staff receive treatments of some kind – an average of eight visits to the school nurse for every boy, girl, man and woman in Barrington 220. These professionals – all of whom are Registered Nurses – proactively deal with seasonal health issues, such as annual cases of the flu, whooping cough (a.k.a pertussis), the common cold or the ever-present head lice. School nurses work hard to inform students, staff and parents by sending preventative messages, updating websites and implementing classroom protocols for the latest disease control measures. They even serve on wellness committees at the building and district levels to help make each school a healthy environment.

In May, I was present when one of our nurses, Mary Anne Wesoloski, received the distinguished “Excellence in Pediatric Care” Award from the Illinois Department of Public Health, the Illinois Emergency Medical Services for Children and the Loyola Medical System. An audience of more than 300 students, staff and parents at Countryside Elementary surprised Mary Anne with the presentation. She is a wonderful nurse and a fantastic caregiver to our community who supports health initiatives at several schools. Nevertheless, I know Mary Anne would say she is just doing her job, like the many other school nurses who are dedicated and passionate throughout Barrington 220.

My little brother Bobby was right in many ways: Nurses are easily mistaken for guardian angels. Whether calming an anxious mother as they explain the actions taken to keep a young child breathing while EMTs were en route to the school, or dealing with the daily mishaps that require expert knowledge and extraordinary personal attention – school nurses are special seraphs, indeed.

Next time you meet a nurse at one of our schools or anywhere along the way, take a moment and believe as my brother did. You may be in the presence of an angel unaware. ☺



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