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From Teen Mother to NICU Nurse

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By Sarah Netter



It's 11 p.m. and Melissa Folse is watching over sleeping babies. Her own children are at home, tucked into their beds. The babies Folse is attending to are too sick to be in their own beds—children born premature, drug addicted or sick.

Folse, 42, is a night nurse in the neonatal intensive care unit, a job that once seemed out of reach but now feels like home.

“Being a part of new life is probably one of the utmost gratifying experiences in this world,” she said. “There is never a guarantee on what you may experience

which to me is exciting.”

Folse, a Louisiana native, once had dreams of becoming a lawyer. But at 17, Folse found out she was pregnant. Her daughter was born in January of her senior year in high school. Folse graduated on time and started college that fall, deciding to work toward becoming a social worker.

“I wasn’t concerned about how to manage a career with being single mom,” she said. “I was more concerned about how to continue my degree without a car when my college was 30 minutes away, and financially keeping my apartment at the same time.”

Folse continued going to school off and on for the next several years while working to support herself and her daughter. She worked at a video store, a Chinese food restaurant and a mental health hospital. She left school a few credits shy of graduating after she married and had her second daughter.

Folse settled with her new family and began working in the hotel industry, a job that she enjoyed and that paid well. But she knew there was more out there for her, something else she could be doing.

“I’m not getting any younger,” she remembered thinking. “I would like to have a good profession that I think I would truly love deep down. That is the one thing that kept coming back at me.”

With two young daughters and a family to help support, the decision to leave her comfortable job was not an easy one.

“What really made me go back is I had to stop and check myself. Am I really happy doing this?”

Folse left her job and picked up a part-time position to earn the money to go back to school. She set her sights on a nursing degree, inspired by the time she spent caring for her ill mother.

“I was scared, but you know what the scariest part was?” she said. “I gave up my comfortable job and my little life ... to go into nursing school to not know whether I was going to pass or fail this.”

Folse threw herself into her studies, learning quickly that being a wife, mother and student at the same time took juggling to a whole other level.

“I’d actually have to leave the house and study. I would go to the library, I would go to a park. I would go to the school,” she said. “And I’d have study groups. I’d go out and meet other students.”

When she was home with her family, Folse made sure it was quality time—trips to the zoo, picnics and family dinners together at the table.

“It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” she said, adding that since nursing school is only pass or fail, she was terrified of a misstep that would cost her the degree. “When you work that hard for anything it’s the biggest reward.”

Her hard work paid off: Folse earned her nursing degree and the awe of her husband and children.

“No one can take the pride of earning your degree away from you. Your children will see you in a higher role and show pride, a different pride, in you,” she said. “I felt I completely beat out the statistic of being that teenage single mom that never can achieve further.”

Folse started out her nursing career taking care of women after they had given birth. She later transferred to the nursery, where she cared for healthy newborns. Then after Hurricane Katrina hit southern Louisiana, where Folse was working, she trained to work in the NICU.

“I was terrified, but then I fell in love with it and never ever want to leave it. It’s amazing,” she said.

“NICU nurses are well trained for the unknown and the what-ifs,” she said. “The honor is huge in being in a role to bringing new life experiences and getting to be a part of the increasing quality of life for our sick newborns.”

Folse is now a mom of three—her youngest is 5 years old. Her oldest daughter is working toward a teaching degree. Her middle child will soon be going to college to study medicine.

Going back to school, she said, was the best decision she could have made both for her family’s financial stability but also for her relationship with her kids.

“Never give in to defeat,” she said. “Take this opportunity to allow your children to become a huge part in the reason for you staying in school and receiving your degree.”

“Take it day to day and just keep moving forward. It may take a little more time but it will have a huge impact on your future,” she added.

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