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A Mother's Work

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A mother's work

As the nursing workforce moves toward a mandate for BSN degrees, three sisters, inspired by their mother, turned to Linfield to boost their careers.

Cornelia Nitu had dreams for her children when she immigrated to the United States from Romania in 1988.

She opened a small business – an adult foster care home – and worked 18-hour days over the next two decades to make those dreams a reality, with education a top priority for her children. Oana Nitu '14 was three years old then, with brothers Daniel, 5, and Sebastian, 1 1/2. Her twin sisters, Debora '17 and Elisa '17, were born four years later.

As they grew, the Nitu children watched their mother care for the residents in their home. They helped with cleaning and cooking, greeted doctors and nurses who visited, and the sisters became certified nursing assistants.

“Nursing made sense for us. We grew up in that environment so it felt very natural to us,” says Elisa.

Cornelia's education dreams have become a reality. All three daughters earned associates degrees from Mount Hood Community College, before transferring to the Linfield RN to BSN program. Now, all are nurses.

“Not only were we the first of our family to go to college, but we were the first of our generation to be in the United States. Both feel like huge accomplishments,” says Oana. She was hired as a staff nurse at Providence Portland Medical Center in 2008, before a BSN was required, but quickly realized her career growth was limited without one.

“Having a bachelor's degree opens up career options exponentially,” says Oana, who now focuses on projects to improve quality for surgical patients. “I wouldn't have this job if I didn't have my BSN.”

Simply being enrolled in Linfield's RN to BSN program helped Elisa and Debora get their first jobs.

For decades, associate degree-prepared registered nurses have made up a significant percentage of the nursing workforce. But in 2010, the Institute of Medicine recommended that 80 percent of the nursing workforce have a baccalaureate degree (BSN) by 2020. Since then, employers have increased

their efforts to hire and retain a workforce with higher levels of education. Research shows that a higher percentage of baccalaureate nurses on a unit leads to better patient outcomes.

Now, as the Nitu sisters found, most U.S. hospitals are hiring nurses with at least a BSN. In 2008, 35 percent of nurses held BSN degrees, but by 2013 that number had jumped to 55 percent, according to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing.

A BSN program prepares nurses to take on a wider variety of roles within a health system, including teaching, consulting, research and administration. The Nitu sisters were particularly drawn to Linfield's liberal arts approach to nursing education, which gave them a broad foundation of classes. One of Debora's favorite classes was in history. And she learned about vulnerable populations while volunteering at a local community clinic.

“Having the opportunity to work out in the community opened my eyes, and I can see what needs to be done beyond the surgical aspect to help patients get better,” Debora says.

Because Linfield's RN to BSN classes are online, the Nitu siblings continued working as they earned their degrees. And while their RN training focused on patient health, the BSN program extended to other aspects of life. Elisa, a non-confrontational person, learned to communicate more directly.

“The BSN program taught me to be a better nurse and a better person,” Elisa says. “I learned skills I'm applying throughout my life to more than just nursing.”

For her part, Cornelia encouraged her daughters as they pursued their careers.

“I am very, very proud of my girls,” she says. “They are the fruit of my labor being a single mom. I always told them, ‘it's a big dream in us and you can do it.’”

– Laura Davis

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Sisters, from left, Debora '17, Oana '14 and Elisa '17 Nitu, were inspired by their mother, Cornelia Nitu, to complete their BSN degrees at Linfield College.