

St. Johns program helps fill nursing shortage

By Sarah Wakefield Rosser
Staff Writer

ORANGE PARK – After years of balancing night shift work, classes during the day and raising two children, Amanda Byron graduated with a bachelor of science in nursing degree in August. She was among the first batch of students to take advantage of a new four-year degree program at St. Johns River State College.

The college recently received the third of three \$30,000 installments from Orange Park Medical Center to get the BSN program up and running in response to a nursing shortage in the area.

“As a nurse with an associate’s degree, I come out knowing the fundamentals,” said Byron, who works in the intensive care unit at Orange Park Medical Center. “When I went into the bachelor’s program, it blew my mind how much we as nurses play a role in overall patient care. The biggest thing is that I feel like the nurses are the heartbeat of the hospital.”

Byron started taking nursing classes at Florida State College of Jacksonville but transferred to St. Johns where she completed an associate degree in nursing in 2013.

Working nights at the hospital freed up her days to continue taking classes online and at St. Johns’ Orange Park campus at 283 College Dr., earning credits toward a BSN. Since graduation, Byron has learned the difference between having an associates and an advanced degree.

“Management comes to the table when talking about education on the bachelor’s level,” Byron said. “The [Bachelor’s in Science in Nursing] program goes into leadership and management. I like to lead and it taught me that I can do this. One of my courses really taught me how to talk to people and handle situations in a professional way.”

The \$90,000 donation over the past three years helped St. Johns River State College build a sustainable nursing program from the ground up after the need for more nurses was expressed by students and health care providers in the area, according to Anna Lebesch, vice-president of Workforce Development and executive director of the Orange Park campus.

“It was the Florida Legislature that specified that programs must be in areas of workforce need,” Lebesch said. “The money was used to help with additional faculty and professional development, on-



STAFF PHOTO BY SARAH WAKEFIELD ROSSER

Amanda Byron said there were many times she questioned her participation in the bachelor of science in nursing program at St. Johns River State College, but when she did, she got the needed encouragement from her instructors to continue.

line curriculum development, and it helped us become accredited. The resources we received from Orange Park Medical Center made it a self-sufficient program. Their support was very important to begin and

receive approval from the Department of Education.”

Byron said that even though OPMC recently hired additional staff, more are needed.

“The department I’m in now, the ICU, we are in transition and hired new staff,” Byron said. “We need more staff and nurses. We beefed up our staffing, but our job is so hard a lot don’t stay and some transition to different branches of medicine. It depends on your support system and the people you have backing you.” Chief of Nursing Officer Kathy Hester said that the partnership with St. Johns and other institutions is vital to cultivate new and upcoming nurses in the area.

“We want to ensure we have the top quality candidates available and we also appreciate and believe in what St. Johns is doing to help ensure that the medical needs of our community are being met now and going forward,” Hester said. “We have a one year program for our new nurses in which they go through a rigorous training process to make sure they serve our patients and to make sure they’re experienced and highly trained to be compassionate. And we want to ensure we are providing the best quality care in North-east Florida.”

Being a nurse is something Byron said she felt called to because of her love of working with people. The BSN program gave her the skills to advocate for her patients who are often unable to speak for themselves.

“I am at the bedside with family for 45 minutes explaining diet restrictions or how certain medications can alter how another drug works in the body. I may have to teach our patients to be careful of hitting stuff because certain medications will cause them to get bruises. Doctors aren’t able to be at the bedside that long. That’s what we do.”

Byron said that the structure and approachability of staff and professors at St. Johns helped her get through the long days and ease her worries associated with juggling work, school and kids.

“St. Johns brings that feeling of everybody knows your name,” Byron said. “Sometimes that’s hard to find at other colleges. I’m paying for my degree so I needed more support as a single mom. They always stopped to answer my questions or listened to me complain about feeding my kids peanut butter sandwiches. They always said ‘this is what we’re here for, this is our job.’”

Up For Adoption

Frankie and Charlie
A013445 and A013444
Neutered Males, Domestic
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CCACC Offsite Adoption Center in Fleming Island
Frankie and Charlie are brothers who came to CCACC as owner surrenders on August 7th of this year. They have been at the Fleming Island location since they arrived here and they do well with all of the other cats at the offsite center. We would love to get these boys a forever home together but do not require it. Please meet these super sweet boys!



General Tso A014091

Neutered Male, Chow Mix
CCACC Main Shelter in Green Cove Springs
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