

NSN Storytelling in Organizations SIG

Stories from the Field

“Heroic Acts in Humble Shoes: America’s Nurses Tell Their Stories”

(Susan Osborn and Gene Edgerton conducted the following interview with Irene Stemler at the NSN 2005 National Storytelling Conference in Oklahoma City.)

Irene Stemler, RN, is the founder of Creating Spirit, a Chicago firm that helps organizations create healthy work environments. As a storyteller and story gatherer she is currently focusing on building retention among nurses in hospitals by collecting their stories. A major project she has created involves displaying nurses’ stories on large posters, along with their well-worn shoes. During the course of this project Irene discovered that her grandfather was a shoemaker!

Irene explains the purpose of her project: “I have been working on nursing recruitment/retention issues for several years. I collaborate with hospitals to create storytelling exhibits for their own use. Right now, I’m working on a research project through the University of Illinois. I’m a site coordinator for their nurse retention grant, and storytelling is one of the interventions.”

She continues, “There aren’t enough nurses to go around so hospitals are short-staffed. They’re spending an awful lot of money on recruiting new staff. We find they’re spending so much money on recruitment they’re neglecting the current staff. What’s being done to retain nurses? How can we keep people in positions for longer periods of time so we don’t have to spend all that money up front?”

Irene shares what it's like to be a nurse: "Nurses are on the floors, on those units, in eight-hour and twelve-hour shifts. Many are working overtime; often it's mandatory overtime. You don't get a chance to go to the bathroom when you need to. You grab a 15-minute break when you should be off the floor for at least half an hour. The intensity while you're on the floor is extreme. This gives you a picture of how a nurse is always rushed and never has a chance to meet his or her own needs. That's how they operate on a daily basis. They go in and out of work with little or no interaction among themselves."

Because of their hectic schedules, nurses have few opportunities to tell their stories. Irene says, "What I find when I work with nurses about 'Heroic Acts in Humble Shoes,' is it's hard to get them off the floor for half an hour to talk with me. When we start to talk I want to know what is their passion? What made them go into this profession in the first place? Then I ask them questions about their current work situations. What gives them the most pride? What makes them happy? What touches them in some way? In the majority of my interviews, about halfway through, a nurse will turn to me and say, 'I've never repeated that story to anyone.' They don't have a chance to share their accomplishments, joys, or frustrations with their own colleagues. Nor have they told their stories at home because they're trying to decompress from their busy work lives."

Irene observes, "Story is a means of connecting them to their fellow nurses and to their profession; it validates their career choice. A simple thing like saying, 'Tell me your story' then truly listening, can be very profound. One woman I interviewed is a rehab nurse. She was feeling stressed, frustrated and grumpy. She said at the end, 'Wow! I'm so happy talking with you because I feel my work is really important.' She was able to

feel validated in her work after giving voice to what she does. Giving the gift of listening to someone's story with your whole being... telling stories, sharing stories...all of this is magical.”

A major problem in the nursing profession is no one says ‘Thank you.’ Irene relates, “When you ask people ‘What will make life better for you here?’ you think people will say, ‘Oh, I need a raise,’ ‘I need a better staff room,’ or ‘I need a lounge.’ Certainly these are all important, but a lot of times they’ll say, ‘It would be so nice just to be thanked.’”

Offering space for people to tell their stories can be perceived as a way of expressing gratitude. Irene describes how nurses see it as a benefit their organizations are providing: “Now, all of a sudden, they’re being recognized for their contributions. They’re thinking whoever is above them, like the V.P. of Nursing or whoever is paying me to do this work with them, is acknowledging their work. They feel they’re being appreciated and thanked because someone is paying me to come in, listen to them, and display their stories throughout the hospital.”

Irene remarks, “Storytelling also builds a sense of community by showing that regardless of specialty area, there is a common thread throughout this profession. The guy down the hall...how is he working with his patients? How are his talents and skills different from mine? We’re starting to look at how people can collaborate together beyond their units.”

How do the exhibits of ‘Heroic Acts in Humble Shoes’ take shape? Irene outlines this process: “When I first say I collect nurses’ stories and their shoes, people look at me in the strangest way, but it piques their interest. After I interview a nurse I edit the results

and boil down a two-hour interview to 500-800 words. Then I put a picture of the nurse and the story (in a circular, question and answer format) on an 18” by 24” poster. The nurse’s shoes are placed on a board or in plexiglass next to each story. The exhibits are displayed in hospital lobbies or in hallways.”

What has been the response? “It’s very, very weird,” she says. “But it’s also kind of cool. The texture of displaying worn shoes brings people in. They wonder, ‘What the heck is that?’ ‘Are they selling shoes? No, those are old shoes. What’s that all about?’”

She continues, “The shoes tell people, ‘It’s a hard job. You’re on your feet all day.’ The other part of it is how the shoes show the diversity in our profession. The shoes of the V.P. of Nursing are different from those of a staff nurse in E.R. These are both different from the shoes of a community health nurse working with the Hopi in Arizona. The shoes show that a real nurse is not like those who are portrayed on TV shows in unflattering ways.

What results has she observed? Irene concludes, “A nice by-product of this project is teaching people on the units how to use stories. Then it’s not just you and me doing our work. We leave something behind for people to pick up on. Also, one hospital has started collecting stories themselves. They have a little booklet they put together.”

What does Irene see in the future? She proposes using stories in recruitment. “When you have students from grammar schools, high schools, or universities visiting hospitals, it would be great to have posters with the nurses in your hospital on display to point out, ‘Here’s what we offer.’ When they see these pictures and stories, they’re apt to say, ‘We want to work in a place where people have this courage and compassion as they work with patients.’”

She points out, “The hospital, itself, needs to be in a position to tell its story. Stories are also important in department and unit orientation. That’s when you need to build unity. You’re in this together, so you really need to know who it is you’re working with.”

What words of wisdom does Irene have to share? She asserts, “Believe that the right thing will happen. In the middle of an interview, for example, don’t get anxious if you start thinking, ‘Oh, I’m not getting anything good here for a story.’ Leave yourself open to possibility, and it will occur.”

She gives this example: “There’s a fellow I interviewed in the E.R. Everyone said I had to interview him because he’d worked in all these emergency situations and was just wonderful. He started as a paramedic, worked at Cook County Hospital in Chicago, and was a trauma nurse specialist. During our interview, however, he came across as the most humble person. He wouldn’t take credit for anything and talked only about the team. I wasn’t able to get what I really needed but I decided, ‘That’s o.k. I’ll just work with what he gave me.’”

Irene continues, “Later on, I was interviewing somebody else in the oncology unit and the V.P. of Nursing walked by. She said, ‘How are things going?’ I replied that I’d spoken with Jack earlier and asked, ‘What’s with the humble thing? I couldn’t believe he didn’t take credit for a lot of the things he has done.’ She said, ‘Oh, he is that way. He doesn’t blow his own horn.’ As we were talking, the ward secretary was sitting there, listening to our conversation. She said, ‘You’re kidding. Jack is wonderful! He took care of my father in the emergency room. He treated him with such dignity. And how he comforted our family was incredible.’ So, I interviewed her. She told me how important

that incident was for her son who was 17 at the time. It made him want to become a paramedic. Her son has now finished his training all because of this one nurse. I included her story as an addendum. His story was very humble but I was able to obtain another story based on someone else's experience with him. It was one of the best stories I heard at that hospital. So, the moral is to accept whatever happens and know that it will work out for the best.

“Another thing to keep in mind,” Irene maintains, “is to really listen. If you're interviewing people about their stories you need to care about what you're doing and who you're interviewing. Your heart needs to be in it. I interviewed a hospital housekeeper who spoke very little English. They really wanted her to be interviewed because she contributed so much to the unit. Her story made me cry. About halfway through she said, ‘Thank you for listening to me.’ She had a wonderful reputation, but no one really knew her story.”

Irene wants to make it possible for more people to know the nurses' stories. If a hospital hires her, the exhibit stays with the hospital but she retains the rights to use the stories. Eventually, she would like to publish them.

Her dream is for ‘Heroic Acts in Humble Shoes: America's Nurses Tell Their Stories’ to be a national tour. One drawback is she doesn't have enough shoes! Most of the shoes are already on display. Perhaps a shoe company will come forward to serve as a sponsor.

Irene Stemler, RN, is a speaker and consultant to nursing and healthcare organizations. For more information on “Heroic Acts in Humble Shoes” or her storytelling workshops, please contact her at istem@aol.com or T: 773-735-8282.