

Seizing opportunities for positive change

By Susan Trossman, RN



Christopher Otto

A cardiac nurse shares his path to leadership.

A SUMMER JOB changed Christopher Otto's career path—and ultimately his life—igniting a passion for providing care to critically ill cardiac patients and working to prevent heart disease among the healthy.

In high school, Otto, BSN, RN, CHFNP, PCCN, took drafting classes and wanted to be an architect. Then his mother suggested a part-time job as a patient escort at a local hospital.

"I didn't have any interest in working in a hospital environment in the long term, but it just clicked," Otto said. "I really liked working and talking with patients, hearing about their lives and their illnesses. I felt even in those few minutes I was with them, I could make a difference."

He soon decided to pursue his associate's degree in nursing and then a bachelor's degree while working as a patient care technician, unit clerk, and ultimately a staff nurse on a cardiovascular–heart failure step-down unit at Christiana Care Health System in Delaware.

Otto assumed he wouldn't be in his first nursing job for long.

"But I fell in love with it, became certified [in the specialty] and stayed on that unit nearly 5 years," he said.

Patients on these units suddenly find themselves in need of intense, cardiac-related care, diagnosed for the first time with pulmonary insufficiency or acute cardiomyopathy, Otto explained. "For me, it was a unique population, because these patients needed so much care and patient teaching. Everything was new to them, and they had to learn what they needed to do to change their lifestyle."

Since moving to the cardiovascular ICU in October 2015, Otto now provides care to both critically ill medical and surgical cardiac patients and works even more closely with family members, providing guidance on what they can expect in care and information on advanced directive planning.

Otto also began taking his expertise and passion for cardiovascular health to the community in 2012 by join-

ing the Million Hearts® Delaware initiative, aimed at preventing heart attacks and strokes in his home state. He also has worked to educate nurses about cardiovascular disease and prevention strategies they can implement in their practice.

Beyond his unit-based position, Otto has taken on leadership roles at Christiana Care and his professional associations.

"I've always had a drive to improve patient care and nursing practice," Otto said. "The answer 'That's the way we've always done it' has never worked for me." To that end, he participated on his unit-based shared governance council, chaired the system-wide professional nurse council, and is now chairing the department of nursing coordinating council, which is creating a nursing strategic plan and evaluating the shared governance model across the system.

Otto also is the Delaware Nurses Association (DNA) board secretary, a leadership position he was elected to on his first try.

"I jumped into the role, and fortunately I had good team members who were willing to show me the ropes," said Otto, who emphasized state and national professional organizations are an important way for nurses to network with their colleagues, engage in professional and educational opportunities, become informed on issues, and participate in leadership roles.

Advice on stepping into leadership role

"Be diligent about looking for opportunities, because they are out there and can come from anywhere," Otto suggests to nurses. "I learned about the open DNA position in an email. So don't delete emails too quickly!"

He also believes that nurses should never limit themselves based on their titles or positions.

"Leadership can be practiced at any level," Otto said. "As a bedside nurse, I've been able to change, influence, and shape multiple facets of nursing care delivery. If you want to *really* make a change in your practice environment, then you have to be involved.

"And don't ever let the past stop you, even if you had a bad experience when trying to speak up before. Take that experience, learn from it, and go back with a stronger plan." ★

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