

What the HCBH partnership means to me

By Tonya Kemp, RN

I've spent my entire career at Lehigh Valley Hospital (LVH) as a labor and delivery (L & D) nurse. And as a nurse in a Magnet hospital, I've had many professional development opportunities, but none compare to my experience in Haiti. When I learned about the nursing partnership between LVH and Hospital Convention Baptiste d'Haiti (HCBH) and that they needed an L & D nurse for a future trip, I jumped at the chance to fulfill my dream to participate in a medical mission. I completed the application and was honored to be selected.

Before the November 2015 trip, my LVH colleagues and I met the HCBH chief nurse via a video-conference where she shared a list of topics she wanted us to teach the HCBH nurses. Because I would be teaching with an interpreter and I had little knowledge of the HCBH nurses' level of expertise or available resources, I prepared the presentations with flexibility in mind.

As I delivered my first few classes on complications of pregnancy, I quickly learned I was not providing new information, but offering reassurance that the HCBH nurses were doing all that they could with their available resources.

The most powerful experience I had at HCBH involved a postpartum patient who had hemorrhaged giving birth. When I met her, she was agitated, pale, and incoherent. For 2 days, the HCBH nurses had been trying unsuccessfully to obtain blood for a transfusion. I was not prepared for the feeling of helplessness I experienced. After being transfused with blood donated by the HCBH medical director, the woman lived. When I returned home, I began working diligently with the Haitian and American Red Cross and with HCBH to get a blood bank at the hospital. I returned to Haiti for 2 weeks in November 2016 to help finalize the plans for the blood bank, which will open this year.

I went to Haiti planning to teach a few classes and returned home feeling good about what I did. I left Haiti not as a teacher, but as a learner. I gained respect for nurses who work tirelessly to provide care despite the lack of resources. I learned what it's like to be in a country where I do not speak the language. And I learned that a successful medical mission to a developing country is not about doing, but about sharing skills and tools to empower those clinicians.