

'She has no barriers:' Meet Bethany Baker, UNF's first deaf nursing student

By **Angela DiMichele** adimichele@jacksonville.com

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Bethany Baker would have laughed if someone told her years ago she would become a nurse.

Even with a family full of nurses, she still wouldn't have believed it.

Every person on her mom's side of the family is deaf in one ear, but she is the first fully deaf member of the family. She didn't imagine that career path for herself.

Baker marked another first last summer.

At 27, she became the first deaf person admitted to the University of North Florida's post-baccalaureate nursing program.

Baker's parents discovered she couldn't hear when she was 6 months old. After graduating from the Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind in St. Augustine in 2009, she went to Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., to pursue a history degree.

It wasn't until the 28-year-old moved to Tennessee that she considered entering the medical field. The idea started with a 96-year-old woman — Mama Ray.

Baker cooked for Mama Ray, helped her use the bathroom and provided care for her in the summer. The deaf community in Tennessee knew the woman well.

Baker quickly became an advocate for the deaf community there.

"I was able to communicate with her directly, and that really hit me," Baker said.

She later took a certified nursing assistant's class and worked in an emergency room for six months. After Mama Ray died in 2016 at almost 100 years old, Baker moved back to Florida to enroll in a nursing program.

She said she not only wants to work with more deaf patients in Florida but also be an advocate for deaf people who want to enter any profession.

Baker has one year left in the program and hopes to become a labor and delivery nurse or an operating room nurse when she graduates.

Currently, Baker shadows Flagler Hospital's patient care technicians with two interpreters. One typically follows her while the other waits outside. She joked she always has two bodyguards.

"Right now, I watch 'Dexter,' but I have also been really into 'Grey's Anatomy,' and so it's cool to see it real life," she said.

The UNF Disability Resource Center provides Baker with the interpreters while she does her clinicals at Flagler every Wednesday and attends classes. She also volunteers for service learning with the American Red Cross in Jacksonville.

Next semester, she will start working in a room at the university that is set up like a real hospital with life-sized mannequins that sweat, urinate and have seizures. She will know before coming in to the room what the condition of the mannequin patient is so she can prepare, and will then be graded on her performance there.

In addition, she will shadow nurses and doctors at Flagler in the next few weeks until she can be on her own with patients.

"Right now in the health-care profession, there is not a lot of deaf people. Deaf people need to go get checkups too just like everyone else, but an issue is communication," Baker said. "Sometimes doctors won't communicate with them, and a lot of times they don't provide interpreters like they are supposed to via the Americans with Disabilities Act. So they just won't go to the doctor, and that's upsetting."

Her time working as a nursing assistant in Tennessee led her to advocacy. One man in particular she remembered.

A deaf man at the hospital was going to have open heart surgery and had no interpreter for three days. While Baker was in the hospital, she made time to check on him.

“He didn’t have a clue about what surgery he was going to have,” Baker said. “He didn’t know what post-operation would look like, pre-operation. He was completely in the dark.”

Baker convinced the hospital to hire her interpreter who remains on staff now working with deaf, blind, deaf and blind and other handicapped patients.

As a nursing assistant, Baker learned to communicate with patients in different ways. She carried a pager for the nurses to contact her and used a tablet to access a remote sign language interpreter to talk to the patients if no interpreter was available in person. Different lights meant they needed to use the bathroom or needed a nurse. She and the patients would also gesture to each other to show her what hurt or rub their stomachs if they were hungry.

“For deaf people, I’m hoping to start this process and experiences and do great, and then I can really open some doors permanently for some other deaf people to get their foot in the medical door,” Baker said. “I’m really happy that the program took a risk on me. I feel more empowered to do a good job. I know that I can do it, and I want to show them that I can do it as well.

In December, Baker will learn with the nursing students at Chiang Mai University in Thailand as part of a study abroad program. Workshops and lectures will be mixed in with a visit to an elephant sanctuary and a traditional massage.

The students will have one free day to explore. Baker plans to visit the largest deaf school in Bangkok on her day off.

Baker’s favorite part about the job is interacting with the patients. Last week, she met an 80-year-old deaf woman who attended Gallaudet too.

The patient couldn’t believe she was there, Baker said.

“I’m really looking forward to seeing more of that. If a nurse tells me there is a deaf patient in there, I’m definitely going to make time to go say hi,” Baker said.

Dr. Li Loriz, UNF School of Nursing director, said the university has had to change the way it teaches in some ways since Baker's admittance.

She has access to closed captioning for her classes, interpreters and specialized equipment, like a stethoscope that connects to her mobile phone so she can see the sounds others hear.

"Initially, the first reaction is people say, 'Wait a minute. A nurse that can't communicate? That won't work,'" Loriz said. "The thing is that there is so many different roles for nurses that you don't have to have hearing in order to fit all those roles. And as you can hear from her, she has no barriers."

Other hearing-impaired students have been in the program before, but Loriz said none were completely deaf. The University of Central Florida and Jacksonville University also had hearing-impaired students who were able to speak.

This was different.

Next semester Baker will go to Brooks Rehabilitation and work with psychiatric patients at either University of Florida Health or Baptist Health.

"Those will be some of the challenges that clinically we're going to face. But you see her and she's bubbly and she's funny and she's just out there. So I don't think she's going to have those problems," Loriz said. "I'm really excited that we are going this extra distance."

Angela DiMichele: (904) 359-4697