



Personal Loss Inspires Professional Gain for CMA (AAMA)



By Cathy Cassata

As a child, Mindy Stark, CMA (AAMA), embraced her mom's interest in medicine. "She taught me to read the entire informational insert that comes with medication before taking it. I learned so much from that. She also watched medical shows like *ER* and *Grey's Anatomy*, so I was always interested in what people go through," says Stark.

As she got older, she considered going to nursing school. Instead, she worked as a store manager when she became a mom at 20 years old. "I had my second daughter at 21, so it was like having twins. I had to

work and support my family, which meant I couldn't go to school," says Stark.

While raising her kids, she worked different jobs, including a 10-year stint at her local bank.

In 2013, Stark's mom passed away after living with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and emphysema for years. "I knew she had left a life insurance policy for me, my two sisters, and my stepdad to split, but I didn't know how much it was," says Stark. "When I got the money from the insurance company, I knew she would be proud if I used it to go to school."

Stark enrolled in medical assisting school at 47 years old. After graduating in 2014, she worked in internal medicine for six months. Over the years, she gained experience in pediatrics, primary care, orthopedics, and neuropathy care before landing her current role at an HIV and hepatitis C clinic. In addition to medical and psychiatric treatment, the clinic offers patients housing

and food inside the building.

"It's meant to be a one-stop shop for those living with HIV or hepatitis C," says Stark. She had to learn about both conditions on the job and on her own because she did not have any prior experience with either.

"One of the doctors I assist gave me a book to read that explained everything about HIV and AIDS, from genetic mutations, treatment, and opportunistic infections to living with HIV and living with both [HIV and AIDS disease]," says Stark.

Her day-to-day duties include rooming patients, taking their vitals and medical history, giving injections, and drawing blood. Interacting with patients is what she enjoys most. "Every one of them has a story to tell and a reason that brought them to this juncture in their life," she says.

Some patients contracted their condition medically through procedures like a lung transfusion, while others got infected due to intravenous drug use.

"We care for everyone with compassion and treat them regardless of how they contracted the disease. Even though they may [have an addiction], they are a person who deserves medical care, and we are trying to prolong their life," says Stark.

Because patients with HIV typically visit the clinic long term, she develops trusting relationships with them. Those seeking treatment for hepatitis C visit the clinic for about six months, and Stark prioritizes providing compassion throughout their journey. "I'm motivated to come to work every day and help patients through a difficult time in their life," she says.

As she reflects on her journey to becoming a medical assistant and her decade-long career, she is grateful for the path she took.

"It's never too late to pursue your dream," says Stark. "I know my mom would be so happy that I'm living it now." ♦