

A Calling to Care

Family Caregiving Experience Leads to Medical Assisting Career



By Cathy Cassata

In June 2001, Patti Stowell, CMA (AAMA), found herself caring for her sister in a way she never imagined. "She was in a terrible car accident with my niece. My niece tragically passed away, and my sister was left with permanent brain trauma, having lost her short-term memory and much of her cognitive rationality," she says.

Stowell took on the role of caring for her sister around the clock. At the same time, her mother's health declined due to congestive heart failure and diabetes. While caring for both women simultaneously with no formal training, Stowell decided to enroll in a certified nursing assistant (CNA) program.

"With all the health issues my loved ones were going through, I wanted to be a better advocate for them, but I needed more experience and knowledge," she says. After getting certified, Stowell balanced caring for her mom, sister, and her own two children while working three jobs at once—driving a school bus, providing home care, and working at a foot clinic.

Despite the stress, her passion for health care grew, and in 2011 she decided to attend nursing school. That same year, her mother died. "My finals were scheduled the day of her funeral, but I took them anyway," says Stowell.

Four months later, her father's health declined from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and he needed constant care, so Stowell moved in with him for nine years. However, during the first year, the strain of caregiving for several family members forced her to drop out of nursing school. "I was barely getting by," she says, "And I knew that I wasn't going to make it."

Her drive to work in health care persisted though, and in 2018 she found a different position as a CNA in hospice. "I really liked the job until a back injury sidelined me and I needed surgery," she says. While recovering, she had time to think about her next career move and decided to attend a medical assisting program. She graduated in 2024 and was hired by a UW Health kidney clinic. Her days are filled with anemia injections, laboratory orders, medication refills, and pre-visit planning. "I still get to have a lot of patient interaction, which I love," says Stowell.

One encounter that stays with her involves a patient who was distressed after learning that, because her chart indicated she was receiving palliative care for a terminal illness, a physician refused to prescribe her treatment to help with an unrelated chronic condition. "She told me that she wasn't able to get certain treatments to help with sleep because of this, and I passed on the information to the doctor and urged her to speak up," says Stowell. When the woman returned for a follow-up, palliative care had been removed from her chart. "When I saw her at the appointment, she said, 'I'll never forget you. You have no idea what you've done [for] me. You've made such a difference in my life,' " says Stowell.

Patient interactions like these remind her that she's exactly where she should be. While she did not know that caring for family would lead to a rewarding career, Stowell says it is a silver lining she is grateful for. "Helping people who might not have loved ones advocating for them or looking out for them brings real meaning to my medical assisting work," she says. "That's what I'm here for. It's my calling." ✦

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