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“Just a CNA”

“Oh, you’re just a CNA”, is a phrase I have been told a countless number of times. I can confidently speak for all CNAs when I say everyone has been told that line at least once in their career. Majority of the time, that saying comes from outsiders who cannot wrap their mind around what the job entails, but it can come from other healthcare workers, and surprisingly other nurses. We get very little recognition for what we do. From the outsider’s perspective, the responsibilities of a CNA are extremely overlooked. They don’t seem to notice that our work goes way past helping with simple daily activities. In some ways I could see from their perspective. They don’t see how much time we spend with the residents. They truly just aren’t there to see how much we do for them other than simple daily activities. Some misconceptions are that the duty of a CNA stops at feeding, bathing, and toileting a patient, which could not be further from the truth. We perform tasks deeper than “surface level cares” every day. Yes, we feed patients, bathe them, assist with toileting cares, buts not where it ends. We monitor vital signs, assist the patient with mobility, support other healthcare professionals with delivering patient care, and assist with medical and mobility equipment. Above all those tasks, we are there for them as a person, as a friend, not just as a patient. We assist them with everyday tasks they would not be able to do without our help. We are there as a shoulder to lean on when they have no one else.

When starting classes for my CNA program I remember being excited to tell everyone around me my decision. Prior to that, I was in school not knowing what I wanted to do career wise. I had made the decision to take a semester off, get my CNA license, then use that time working to see if healthcare is what I truly wanted to do. When announcing my decision to the people closest to me, I did not get the reaction I expected to. It had become such a stressor when it came to figuring out what I wanted to further my education in, so when announcing that I wanted to get my CNA certification in hopes of falling in love with healthcare, I thought everyone would be happy for me. Except all I got was, “Are you sure?” “You’re going to waste your time!” and most commonly, “All you do is wipe ass all day, you really want to do that?” After repeatedly hearing those comments for weeks, the excitement I had to officially start working was slowly disappearing. I let those negative comments cloud my mind, letting myself forget why I wanted to start this journey in the first place. As soon as I started working it felt as if weight was immediately getting lifted from my shoulders. All those negative thoughts disappeared from my head, and I had fallen in love with the job, getting to know the residents, being there for them when they need it the most. No, it was not easy at first. I remember on my first day off training I was put with a group of people that was looked at as an “easy” group. What I mean by easy is everyone is bed by 7-8 o’clock, everyone is very nice, and all their night routines were short and simple. I failed to consider that I have never walked through their routine before. Therefore, it took time for them to explain the steps and it took time for me to do things the way they like it. That pushed me back having to do that with every resident. It stressed me out and that’s when I thought back to the negative comments. As I continued working and became familiar with all the routines, all those thoughts went away. I realized it’s a given it will

be hard at the start. I will continue to learn and get better as time goes on, so I learned not to be too hard on myself .

Within the first couple of weeks, I was shown the reason why people go into this profession. Of course, it was hard in the beginning. I had never worked in healthcare before, so it was all new to me. It was intimidating starting out with the residents being complete strangers not knowing their routine knowing the other workers know it like it's the back of their hand, plus the negative comments that have yet to leave my had at this time. As time went on and I became familiar with the people, the routines, and I was able to find my sense of confidence while working, I found that it's truly rewarding to help people who are in need. It made me feel so good about myself when I would walk in a room and know exactly what I was doing. The residents typically don't have the best memory, but it would always make me laugh when they would be surprised that I knew what to do without having to be told. They always said something along the lines of, "You must have helped me out before. I didn't have to tell your one thing!". I've always had a passion for helping others but helping people when they are physically not able to due to a sickness, physical disability, or simply their body is giving up due to their age is a type of reward I've never felt before. It's difficult to find something else that compares.

One thing that I have learned that I don't think is known to outsiders is that CNAs spend a significant amount more time with the residents than anyone else, even the nurses. With that being said, we are able to have a unique, valuable perspective on patient care. We get to know the residents on a deeper level that are not usually seen by anyone else. Because of all the one-on-one time with the residents, we are often one of the first to notice a change in their health, their strength, their mobility, and even just their mood for the day. For example, there was one resident who I always loved to have. She would always joke around and show how happy she

was to see I would be working with her for the day. She's always so smiley. I walked into her room one day and I could tell something was off, I just didn't know what it was. She wasn't greeting me with a smile as I walked in her door, she wasn't cracking a joke, her mood just seemed different. I didn't say anything at first, but then I came back to ask if there was anything wrong. She then expressed how she hasn't seen her family in a while, and it was starting to affect her. That is something an individual wouldn't notice if they weren't around her as much as we are. They probably might have thought that it was normal. That she just has a neutral personality. We are often able to notice small, important changes that might be missed by others. Whether that's a change in their appetite, mood, or the development of new symptoms. We get to know our residents' behaviors, preferences, and emotional needs that other staff do not. This provides a better understanding on a resident's wellbeing that goes beyond their medical status.

Working in long term care, it is especially important to form these close bonds with the residents. It's a sad fact, but a lot of these residents rarely get visitors from friends, family, and loved ones. Knowing this, I try to really take my time to sit and bond with them, get to know them, form a relationship with them that goes deeper than seeing them as a patient, but someone I truly care about. At my facility, we have this yearly Christmas dinner where each resident gets a table reserved for them and their family. It is a day residents look forward to all year. They get to get all dressed up, have a nice dinner, and get to spend the evening with their loved ones. There were a few residents who did not try to hide the fact they were dreading the day. It was the residents whose families never put in the effort to visit. Imagine being a resident and hearing everyone around you for weeks talking about how excited they are for that one day. Talking about how their whole family is coming out that night, but you haven't seen your own family in months. I really feel for them. It was clearly very difficult for them; they didn't try to hide it. My

coworkers and I did everything we could to fill the night with as much happiness as we could for them. While the other residents had private tables for them and their family, we had our table filled with staff who cared so much about making this a night the residents enjoyed.

In conclusion, misconceptions of the role of being a CNA often comes from the misunderstandings and lack of consideration of the skills needed for the role. We are often overlooked when in reality, CNAs are a crucial position in healthcare. So, no, I am not “just” a CNA. I am a CNA who makes sure your loved ones are getting the best possible care they can receive. I am a CNA who will sit and listen to residents talk all day to distract them from the fact their families don’t visit them. I am a CNA who loves her job and has a genuine passion for providing care to those who need it the most.