THE CLASS OF 2015

Five soon-to-graduate students (and one recent grad) in health care degree programs on what they've learned and what they hope to achieve in medicine

From left: Jenny Parfitt, Brieregar, Caroline Estrada, Diane Nielsen, and Ryan Templeton

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Jenny Pufki Brinegar is an October 2014 graduate of J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, where she received an associate degree in applied science. She's a new registered nurse in the neurology department at VCU Medical Center, where she often works with stroke patients. Brinegar previously worked in sales.

**Academic demands:** "You've got to be quick on your feet, for sure. We started out with 30 students and ended up with 17 after the first class. If you fail a class twice, you’re done. The school won't take you anymore."

**Finding a job:** "The nice thing about VCU is that they post jobs for new graduates, and if they give you a phone interview and you pass that level, they'll send your application to different departments. I had a really good experience on the neurology unit during school, so when I found out that was one of the places that it went, I was really excited."

Caroline Estrada is studying for her licensed practical nursing (LPN) degree at Henrico County-St. Mary's Hospital School of Practical Nursing, a certification she needs to continue as the clinical attendant (formerly known as the school nurse) at Mayeury Elementary School in western Henrico. She graduates in April.

**What is required of a school nurse today:** "So many children have asthma. Some may have undiagnosed asthma, and the first time they have an attack may be at school. There are also food allergies and contact allergies. There are children that have feeding tubes. If a child has a tracheotomy tube, they may need suctioning done. They may have catheters. Also, the staff need more care than they did in the past, whether it's a pregnant teacher who feels faint, teachers with diabetes, stress, panic attacks. I'm seeing more and more of it, and I'm hearing more and more of it from my colleagues."

**The time commitment:** "There were weeks where we would have school Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, and we would have work Wednesday and Friday, and we'd have hospital clinical [rounds] on Saturday and Sunday, and then we'd repeat it the following week. This would go on for two or three weeks at a time. And then there's homework. [Laughs] You don't know what to expect until you're in it."

Diane Nielsen is set to graduate in June from the Medical Careers Institute in Williamsburg, where she is studying to become a registered nurse. She’s a former bartender and waitress, and as a 45-year-old mother of two, Nielsen says she wanted to "have a career." She hopes to be a psychiatric nurse.

**Changing focus:** "I went in thinking, I'm gonna save lives, I'm gonna work in an ER, then I'm gonna work at the ICU, and then I'm gonna fly on Nightingale [the medical helicopter], yeahahh! And then, I went to Eastern State Hospital on a clinical rotation, and I loved psychiatric nursing. I was in a ward of men. Some of them had committed very serious offenses, and some of them had to have their medications tweaked, because mental illness is constantly changing. Your brain is constantly changing from your hormones or your neurotransmitters."

**Advice for prospective students:** "Nursing school is no joke. It is hard. Anybody who is interested in the medical field, do it. But it is no joke."

Ryan Templeton is at the VCU School of Pharmacy and expects to graduate with a Doctor of Pharmacy degree in May. He was a science teacher for Chesterfield County Public Schools and also directed the VCU Governor's School for Medicine and the Health Sciences. He has applied to four community pharmacies on the East Coast for a yearlong residency.

**What prompted the career change:** "My father passed away in 2008, and it gave me pause to think about what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. Pharmacists are in many ways an educator for the patient. You have to be attentive to details. It's almost like taking a teacher out of the classroom and putting him into a community pharmacy. That's how I envision myself."
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The pharmacist's role in medical care:
The pharmacist is often called the last line of defense when it comes to giving medications to the patient. If there is any problem or any concern, the pharmacist is the last health care professional to make sure that everything checks out. It's a very large role for one person to play.

Johnathan Ramey is set to graduate in May from the VCU School of Nursing with a bachelor of science in nursing, and he is president of the MCV campus' Student Government Association.

Why he chose nursing: "Nobody in my family had ever gone to college before. I was thinking at the time I wanted something that would be practical that I could do in four years and have a decent chance of getting a job. I wanted something I could do and give back a little bit."

His ideal field: "I really like working in the moment, like acute care. People come in sick, you kind of fix them up and get them on their way. I think critical care helps me stay on my toes, and because I'm young, I can lift the patients and be all over the place and not get much sleep. It's a very attractive job for a single person."

Becky Balog will graduate this December with a master's degree in occupational therapy from the VCU School of Medicine. She hopes to work in pediatrics.

What occupational therapy is: "We help you move with a purpose. So, it's not just walking down a hallway; it's walking down the hallway so you can go make your kids breakfast in your kitchen. It's sequencing the tasks so you can do all those fulfilling things in life that you've enjoyed doing up until you've had a disease or a disability."

What it's like to work with children: "A lot of children who've had some kind of disability or disease in their lifetime are developmentally delayed. So, it's a lot of playing, a lot of games, a lot of coloring, a lot of practicing your handwriting. It looks a lot different [depending on the child], but with the same goal of helping those kids interact with the world around them the way they want to."