

Harper Talks – Ann Portmann – Episode 2

[00:00:00.150] - Brian Shelton

I'm Brian Shelton, and you are listening to Harper Talks, a co-production of Harper College Alumni Relations and WHCM Harper radio.

[00:00:09.540] - Brian Shelton

The road to a community college can come from many directions while the vast majority of students come straight from their high school graduation. Some students come from a long, successful career and are looking for a change. And Portman had a 20 year career as a financial planner and accountant before she discovered a different calling in nursing today, as she works as the care team manager for JourneyCare Barrington. While many of us do not like to think about end of life care and decisions, these are issues we all have to deal with and helps train Harper nursing students so that they can be better prepared to care for their patients and joined me for the Harper Talks podcast over Zom.

[00:00:51.720] - Brian Shelton

Good morning and welcome to Harper Talks.

[00:00:53.340] - Ann Portmann

How are you today? I'm doing well, thank you.

[00:00:55.390] - Brian Shelton

How are you? I am absolutely wonderful. It is winter day when we're recording this and so I'm not enjoying the cold.

[00:01:03.870] - Ann Portmann

It was spring yesterday!

[00:01:03.870] - Brian Shelton

So yesterday it was spring yesterday. That's right. So you are a Harper College Distinguished Alumni. And so I know a lot about you, but we want our listeners to know about you as well. And I was interested. You had a two decade career as a financial planner and accountant, and then you gave that up for a totally different career.

[00:01:27.060] - Brian Shelton

And I'm always fascinated by people who make that kind of leap because I've considered it several times in my life. I was just wondering how how did you come to that decision?

[00:01:37.060] - Ann Portmann

It was truly a calling. There was not one particular event, not nothing happened. My company was going through some changes. There were talks of reorganization. And I got to thinking, what what am I going to do if my job is eliminated? Where do I want to be? Where do I see myself? And I saw myself as a hospice nurse and I started thinking about it and talking about it and looking into it. And then my company didn't make any changes and my job was not impacted.

[00:02:08.770] - Ann Portmann

However, my heart and my brain and my all of me was impacted. And I decided that even though I still had a job, I was going to leave that job behind myself and head down the path of becoming a hospice nurse.

[00:02:22.840] - Brian Shelton

Well, that's I mean, it's quite a bold leap.

[00:02:25.630] - Ann Portmann

So it was a big leap. Yes.

[00:02:29.530] - Brian Shelton

So once the choice was made to pursue nursing, I mean, you had a lot of different options being here in the northwest suburbs of Illinois.

[00:02:37.000] - Brian Shelton

How did you get the Harper College?

[00:02:39.520]

Harper College had such an outstanding and still does have such an outstanding reputation for being a strong nursing school. I live in Palatine. The price was very reasonable for becoming a nurse. And I decided to pursue the associate's degree in nursing because I had two and a half years to complete the program before my own kids started going to college. So I had to put my head down and get through this so that I could be out of college so that they could go to college.

[00:03:07.160] - Ann Portmann

So Harper was a very easy decision and I was fortunate to have the grades and get the test results so that I was able to get into the outstanding program that Harper does have.

[00:03:20.900] - Brian Shelton

So were you able to finish before your kids went to college or where you overlapping?

[00:03:24.380] - Ann Portmann

I graduated in December of 2012 and then my son graduated from high school in May of 2013 and went on to college.

[00:03:30.530] - Brian Shelton

That's wild

[00:03:30.530] - Ann Portmann

So I was gainfully employed by the time he left for college.

[00:03:37.670] - Brian Shelton

Well, what did he think of that? What did you think of Mom going back to college?

[00:03:42.380] - Ann Portmann

It was interesting that both of my children were in junior high high school getting ready to go to college, trying to figure out what they wanted to be for the rest of their life. So I think it was set a good example for them that, yes, you're 18 years old now, starting to plan your life, but life is a journey, so you follow it along.

[00:04:00.770] - Ann Portmann

And just because you choose to do something right now as an eighteen year old when you're 40, you maybe will choose to do something else. So I think I like to think I hope I was an inspiration to them, that life truly is a journey full of twists and turns. And you just along for the ride?

[00:04:15.260] - Brian Shelton

Well, I think that's a very important conversation to have with our own kids, but also with our students at a place like Harper College.

[00:04:22.280] - Brian Shelton

And then, you know what you think you want to do right now at 18 or 19 years old might not be what you want to do when you're 40 or 45 or wherever you are. I mean, I know personally I have had a crisis of faith and what I'm doing over the years. Right. And I have looked at other avenues and have stayed in education because it's an exciting field. But I see people all the time who reach mid career and then all of a sudden they're like, oh, my goodness, I don't want to do this anymore.

[00:04:50.870] - Brian Shelton

What do I do?

[00:04:51.500] - Ann Portmann

So that was me. And I was very fortunate. My family was very supportive. We were able to make it work financially. And this is just such a calling. And I'm so passionate about what I do right now. And I'm so grateful that I followed that calling. I mean, I could have stayed where I was at. I didn't have to make a change, but it was just such a strong sense of I needed to do that and I listened and here I am.

[00:05:16.460] - Brian Shelton

That's great. So, you know, I'm faculty at Harper College and have been around nursing faculty for for a very long time.

[00:05:24.860] - Brian Shelton

I hear the stories of the rigor and the discipline required to be in the nursing program. What was the hardest part for you in that?

[00:05:35.410] - Ann Portmann

Instructors are phenomenal, and they do they want to they want the Harper nursing graduates to represent the strength of the Harper nursing program, and they push you to as far as you can be pushed and in a good way, because nursing, like most careers, I mean, we have to be critical thinkers. We have to think on our feet.

[00:05:57.920] - Ann Portmann

We have to be able to make decisions. We have to learn when to rely on others and when you need to figure it out yourself and they push you hard. But I'm so grateful for that, because when I graduated from Harper, I knew that I had the skills that I needed to become a successful nurse. I wasn't there yet. I still

had a lot of learning to do. But they built the foundation to help me build a foundation with so much strength that I felt very confident going into the working world that I could do it.

[00:06:27.990] - Brian Shelton

What was the fun part about the nursing program, I mean, there has to be some joy.

[00:06:32.070] - Ann Portmann

Oh, absolutely. Some days it's hard to find. But truly the most fun part of the nursing curriculum was that capstone experience the last eight weeks. And I've told them over the years that you really need to emphasize that more because you work so hard for the first three and a half semesters. And then at the very end, you get to do this capstone, you get to practice being a nurse.

[00:06:53.740] - Ann Portmann

And it's such a phenomenal experience to know that all those hours and days of studying and just repeating and repeating and repeating that when you go out and do that capstone, that they did prepare you for where you're supposed to be going and. Best experience was that part, and then while you're going to the program is the camaraderie that you have with the other students. I mean, I was fortunate when I was in the nursing program, there were many other students who are a little bit older, like me, who were juggling, having kids and being a mom and working part time and being a student.

[00:07:26.310] - Ann Portmann

And we just had a really good camaraderie, a really good relationship. And to be able to lean on each other throughout the process is very important.

[00:07:34.260] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, I've noticed that there are a lot of people who have later in life chosen to go into nursing.

[00:07:41.700] - Brian Shelton

And the cynic in me says that it's a career that maybe makes a very reasonable wage, a very reasonable salary.

[00:07:52.320] - Brian Shelton

Right. For the work and the education that you need. But it seems like there has to be so much more to that. Right. You're not just going into it for the money. Right.

[00:07:59.430] - Ann Portmann

Absolutely not.

[00:07:59.430] - Brian Shelton

Why do you think big career change and go to that or people like maybe in the 30s or 40s switch into that?

[00:08:05.640] - Ann Portmann

And I think actually some people take a pay cut, they've been in the corporate rat race where they're sitting at a computer, they're they're they're sitting at a computer. They're they just don't feel like that they're contributing to society the way that maybe they want to. So I know in my case, like being a mom, my kids were getting older. I'm just by nature a caretaker. I want to do something beneficial that can help somebody else. And so by going into career changing careers and going to nursing, it was a pay cut.

[00:08:39.180] - Ann Portmann

I have less vacation time. I have less flexibility, but my heart is so much more full. So I think that's why a lot of people that I got to know in the nursing program were thinking the same along the same lines. It wasn't it's harder. I mean, I had a corporate job. I could take holidays off. I could take all kinds of stuff off. And now all of a sudden I have to work holidays. Sometimes I had to work overnights and I have to work weekends.

[00:09:05.640] - Ann Portmann

So it it's a more physically and sometimes emotionally draining experience for less money, but so worth it.

[00:09:13.500] - Brian Shelton

Yeah.

[00:09:13.770] - Brian Shelton

I think from the financial and the calling standpoint, you know, education is very similar because so many of us work in fields where we could obviously make significantly higher sums of money working in our profession rather than teaching our profession. But we find that the education portion of it is so much more fulfilling. So, yeah, I totally identify with that.

[00:09:35.410] - Brian Shelton

So you mentioned earlier that you were called to do nursing and this was one of the to do hospice care nursing, and that was one of the questions that I had planned on asking you about. So you say it's a calling, but what made you choose that line of work? I mean, it's a very specialized area.

[00:09:51.450] - Ann Portmann

It is very specialized. I honestly. Don't know exactly why I chose hospice nursing, it was a calling many years ago in the early 80s, my mom worked for a hospice agency when hospice was in its infancy in the country. But I didn't have any specific I didn't have anything specific. It was just it was just a calling. That's what I'm supposed to be doing.

[00:10:15.900] - Brian Shelton

OK, so for our listeners who don't really know or don't fully understand what hospice care is, could you explain that for us?

[00:10:23.040] - Ann Portmann

Sure, I'd love to. Hospice care is when a person is either newly diagnosed with the disease where there's no there's no curative treatments available, or maybe somebody's been battling an illness for many, many years and the curative treatments are no longer working. So the doctors say there's nothing else that we can do to help improve your disease process. And within the next six months, we would expect that you will die from this disease. That's where hospice care comes in.

[00:10:55.590] - Ann Portmann

So you switch from trying to make things better, trying to fix things to trying to provide comfort for the person's final days. Whether you're truly talking about days, hours, days, weeks, months, hospice, nursing, hospice care provides comfort for that time period. One of the most amazing things about hospice care is it's truly holistic. So within your hospice team, you've got a nurse, you've got a physician, you've got a social worker, you've got a nurse's aide, you've got a chaplain, you've got music panatology.

[00:11:28.170] - Ann Portmann

You have massage therapy, you have art therapy. At the center of that care team is the patients surrounding that patient? Is that patient's community, the family, the spouse, the parents, the siblings, the friends, the patients who live in nursing homes, the nursing home staff, hospice care provides care to that whole the whole group, that whole circle that that person is hospice does not do anything to hasten death. Hospice doesn't do anything to prolong life.

[00:12:01.050] - Ann Portmann

Hospice provides care until your natural days have come to an end. A truly holistic just taking care of the person, mind, body and soul. It's just an amazing thing

[00:12:14.340] - Brian Shelton

For our listeners. You know, I can see. And because we're talking over Zoom. But you can I can see that she's very emotional and very caring when she talks about the subject is definitely something that is an important part of your life. But I guess I'll ask what might seem like an obvious question to you, but maybe do you find the work sad? I mean, how does one cope with being surrounded by death and dying every day?

[00:12:37.650] - Ann Portmann

And that's a question that many, many people have. So a great question and. Yes, do I cry at work? Absolutely. Do I laugh at work? Absolutely. And everything in between the people that work in hospice, for all of us, it's some sort of accounting. I have a friend who says that you don't choose hospice. Hospice chooses you. So those of us that are working here, we need to be here because we've been blessed with the ability to take what could be very sad and help the families we focus on living so.

[00:13:14.300] - Ann Portmann

We're going to help you live until you die, so I've been involved in different things, like helping a patient get to a Cubs game, helping a patient get to her granddaughter's wedding, taking a patient out for breakfast one last time, honoring somebody with retirement ceremony right before they die. I work in the Barrington Care Center and the inpatient unit and even on the unit, we've had weddings, we've had baptisms, we are able to help the families, not always accept the end of life is near for their loved one, but to celebrate that person's life so that, yes, they're going to be sad.

[00:13:53.980] - Ann Portmann

And we tell people all the time, no matter how prepared you are, it's OK to be sad because you've lost that person here, but you have their spirit with them. So we do things like we make thumb print pendants for with grandma and the young kids are we'll do hand hand molds. We just try to help the families celebrate the person's life as that life is coming to an end.

[00:14:19.590] - Brian Shelton

It sounds like I mean, you have something I don't have. I, I couldn't do that.

[00:14:24.070] - Ann Portmann

But I have to be here. This is this is where I have to be. This is this this is where I need to be. So, yes, there are some days where I cry really hard because somebody is hurting. I take comfort in knowing that

we're making the patient as comfortable as we can and we're doing everything we can to support that person's circle. But we're humans. We cry, we laugh. We used to hug. We can't hug with covid now, but.

[00:14:48.940] - Brian Shelton

Right.

[00:14:49.420] - Brian Shelton

Well, you know, speaking of that is very, very topical. I mean, how has that affected what you do? Our family still able to come and visit there? Well, I mean, there are relatives, right?

[00:15:00.520] - Brian Shelton

You're not at hospice unless you're dying, right.

[00:15:02.230] - Ann Portmann

So correct. Yes, especially in the care center. So we we have strict we check people in our receptionists checks for symptoms. We check people's temperatures. But we have throughout this whole thing, have been able to allow visitors because nobody should die alone. So for patients who have the patients have COVID, but we have to limit the visitors or the visitors safety. But we are still being able to allow families and loved ones to come and be with their person as they approach their final hours.

[00:15:37.990] - Ann Portmann

And that's just so important to me. And we all work together as a team to make sure we can keep that option open. The hospitals aren't letting visitors in, but throughout all of this, at our care centers, we have made sure that people are not dying alone.

[00:15:51.730] - Brian Shelton

Oh see. That's really interesting because everything that you everything that I've read and seen in the news is about family not being able to visit their loved ones as they were dying. But you're saying that's in the hospitals but not at hospice.

[00:16:02.740] - Brian Shelton

And that's a you can I guess maybe a weird question. Can you can you move? Someone was covered from the hospital to a hospice care center so that they can then be with their loved ones. Is that a possibility?

[00:16:14.140] - Ann Portmann

It is. And we've done that many times over this past six or eight months. We've had people coming from the hospitals to be here, especially in the spring when things were so locked down. We would get patients here who'd been in a nursing home and then the hospital, and then they came here for their final days and their family hadn't seen them for three months. And we were able to provide them with the avenue so that they could spend some time with their loved ones before they died and say their goodbyes.

[00:16:40.540] - Ann Portmann

Very important.

[00:16:42.100] - Brian Shelton

That's that's fascinating. How are you and your staff protecting yourselves?

[00:16:48.040] - Ann Portmann

We have all the we we have an amazing team who monitors the CDC and IDPH and we have the most up to date guidelines on what to do with the PPE. We have adequate PPE so we can keep our staff protected according to what the CDC recommends.

[00:17:04.120] - Brian Shelton

That's interesting.

[00:17:05.560] - Brian Shelton

So you are very involved with the Harper nursing program. Still, you're helping to train that next generation of nurses. So I guess my question is, what drives you to give back in that way? I mean, you could walk away, you've got your degree, you've got your job. You don't need the help.

[00:17:20.210] - Ann Portmann

Right. I love to be able to talk to the nursing students. I love to go back. Lisa Ayers had had me going for the third semester after they take their final exam. I get to go in and spend about an hour teaching them about hospice nursing. And it's just I think it's very powerful for the students to hear firsthand what hospice nursing is all about. And the nursing program, rightfully so, focuses on improving. What can you do to help improve the health of a patient?

[00:17:53.020] - Ann Portmann

What can you do to help get them stronger? And there are some situations that that's not possible. So I'm able to come in and teach them about when when you can't help somebody get stronger, how can you still help them? How can you help them to understand where they're at? How can you have these difficult conversations with family members? How can you speak to the physicians about suggesting hospice care for the patients and to build a comfort to just try to plant the seed for these nursing students, that sometimes that's the best option and it's not a bad option.

[00:18:26.350] - Ann Portmann

I mean, that's one thing that's certain for all of us is that we're all going to die. And when we've done everything we can to help somebody get stronger or better. And we can't then instead of feeling defeated, you have this other tool that you can offer to the families or suggest to the physician. So it's a great opportunity to teach them to have this tool in your back pocket as you're helping a patient to get stronger when they can't. Here's something else you can recommend.

[00:18:50.710] - Ann Portmann

So I love talking to the students. I love having the students here in the care center. The instructors at Harper helped to build such a strong foundation for me. I just love to be able to go back and share with their current students what they provided to me.

[00:19:05.460] - Brian Shelton

That's awesome. Have you been able to successfully recruit any Harper students into your field?

[00:19:09.930] - Ann Portmann

We have. I'm one of my nurses at the care center right now as a Harper grad, and we've had a few other students that were here that work for JourneyCare now. So it's awesome. It's not for everybody. But when when you have that in your heart, it's great to be able to bring them in here.

[00:19:23.580] - Brian Shelton

Fantastic. So what did it mean to you to be nominated and to win a Distinguished Alumni Award from Harper College? What was that like?

[00:19:32.920] - Ann Portmann

That was such an honor and just being part of the program and reading, listening to the other distinguished alums and just such an honor. I'm kind of speechless. I just felt very honored.

[00:19:44.910] - Brian Shelton

That's great. Well, as we wrap up here today, I want to tell you I really appreciate chatting with you, but I was curious what advice you would have for any student who is thinking about going to college, particularly at a community college like Harper. What would you what would you tell them to do?

[00:19:59.070] - Ann Portmann

Definitely pursue it. Harper has many wonderful programs. It's a great way to kick off a career. Or if you are thinking about a second career, it's a great place. The faculty are the staff. They're so approachable. And I know there's a lot of resources to help you figure out what you want to do if you don't have such a strong calling like I did. But be brave, be strong, see what's out there, see what else you can do.

[00:20:27.840] - Brian Shelton

Well, and I want to thank you so much for taking the time out of your day to talk to us today and share your remarkable story with our students and alumni and other listeners. And hopefully maybe they'll inspire someone to go into nursing or hospice care as well. Thank you so much.

[00:20:43.380] - Ann Portmann

I hope so. Thank you.

[00:20:44.460] - Brian Shelton

Harper Talks is a co-production of Harper College Alumni Relations and WHCM Harper Radio. Our show is produced by Shannon Hynes. Our technical producer is Eric Bonilla Sanchez. Our theme music was created by Aidan Cashman. I'm Brian Shelton. Thanks for listening.