

Immigrant nurse takes care

Program allows Belarus native to quit making artificial flowers, return to nursing

By Tom Vogt Columbian staff writer

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Valentina Podrez of Washougal checks an IV at Providence Portland Medical Center.

Valentina Podrez is an experienced nurse who'd been an important health care provider for her community. A few years later, Podrez was making bouquets out of plastic flowers. Now she is on track to return to her original profession, thanks to a Northwest program that helps immigrant nurses earn their credentials in this country.

The Washougal woman is part of the Workforce Improvement with International Nurses, or WIIN, program.

"I last worked as a nurse 15 years ago," said Podrez, a native of the former Soviet Union republic of Belarus. "We were in a small town, and I could almost work as a doctor."

Then she and her husband, Vladimir, came to the U.S.

"We wanted our children to have a better life. We were persecuted because we're Christians," she said in the living room of her Washougal home.

"When we moved, my biggest concern was that I was not going to be a nurse anymore," Podrez said. "I decided to live a different life."



Washougal resident Valentina Podrez checks patient Dorothy Bryant of Vancouver at Providence Portland Medical Center. Registered nurse Natasha Tokar, who is mentoring Podrez, observes.

It meant a job in the Portland area that was well below her skill set.

“I was working in Tualatin, earning \$5.50 an hour making artificial flowers,” Podrez said. “We were so happy to be able to pay the bills and have a little money to buy a telephone. The next month, we bought a microwave.”

She eventually heard about the program for immigrant nurses. It’s a familiar story, says Judy Anderson, the program director. “We help nurses who are educated in another country and living here permanently,” said Anderson, whose office is at a Clackamas Community College campus in Milwaukie, Ore. “They get licensed and brought up to standards in U.S. nursing.”

Washington State University Vancouver is a partner in the program, and Clark College recently joined the program through a grant from the Northwest Health Foundation, which funds WIIN. Only a dozen or so nurses — they must be legal residents — can be selected each year for the program.

“They are good nurses, with good instincts. But they have to be open to the challenges of new expectations,” Anderson said, because the job may entail more than they were accustomed to.

“It requires a high level of English, which is set by the state board of nursing. It’s a safety issue: You can’t misinterpret something a physician or a patient says,” Anderson said.

There is a flip side to the language issue: Bilingual nurses are valuable resources in hospitals that treat patients who’ve come here from all over the world. The program has helped many students make an economic turnaround.

“We’ve had to get them gas money or help with their utility bill,” Anderson said. “And a couple of years later, they’re buying a house.”

The program costs more than \$7,000, Anderson said, but students are eligible for scholarships, loans and grants.

“The vast majority couldn’t afford it without help,” she said.

The program runs for five academic quarters. The schedule accommodates the students’ work schedules and family obligations, with classroom sessions from 4:30 to 8 p.m. three days a week, plus Saturday sessions once a month. That’s not all, though.

“They work two hours at home for each hour of class,” Anderson said.

These folks are used to hard work. A Battle Ground nurse — one of a dozen Clark County WIIN graduates — got her training in Bosnia. After moving to Germany, the woman was told she had to complete an entire program in that country. She did.

“When she got here, she was told she had to go through a whole program again,” Anderson said. “If she got credit for all her prior classes, which was unlikely, it would be two full years — if she was admitted at all. There were more than 500 applicants in the Clackamas program for 40 slots.

“It would have been her third program. She found about WIIN, and now she is a charge nurse at Kaiser,” Anderson said.

WSU Vancouver provides a higher ed option for the nursing students. They can obtain a bachelor’s degree at the Vancouver campus, and WSU Vancouver also provides a path for nurses considering a teaching career. “There is a huge need for faculty,” said Dawn Doutrich, associate professor of nursing at WSU Vancouver.

So far, Southwest Washington students get their nursing licenses in Oregon first. They can apply for a licensure transfer to Washington, Anderson said. That’s another reason program officials are looking forward to getting Clark College fully involved.

“We want to come under Clark’s auspices” for licensing, Anderson said. “We are excited to serve as the first expansion site for this important program,” Bob Knight, Clark College president, said in a news release. “Our nursing program is nationally recognized for the quality of education that we provide and the positive impact of our graduates on health care in our region. We are facing a long-term nursing shortage with a special need for bilingual nurses. The WIIN program is an important step in meeting that need, and we are proud to be a partner.”

Podrez, the Washougal nurse, still has some work to do before she can reenter the profession. She needs to put in 160 unpaid hours of clinical experience, under the supervision of a registered nurse, at Providence Portland Medical Center.

“If the assessment is successful, the state board can grant full licensure, and she can apply for licensure in Washington,” Anderson said.

Podrez feels prepared for the challenge, thanks to her instructors.

“I thought I’d forgotten it all. When I started, it came back,” Podrez said. “They lead us step by step. I felt like a chick with mother hens.”