

What I learned by participating in the My Life My Story Program

August 24, 2020 | Sharon Chia, PA student, Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences

I spent one month completing my Physician Assistant elective clinical rotation in the urgent care center at the Jamaica Plain campus of VA Boston just before the COVID outbreak. During my time here, I was mentored by incredibly kind and intelligent Physicians, Physician Assistants, and Nurse Practitioners. They encouraged my learning and helped expand my experiences and skills despite urgent care being an environment of quick patient turnover. I hoped to learn and grow my skills, and was thrilled when I was allowed to perform small procedures, like suturing or removing foreign bodies. What I didn't expect was to gain an experience that seemingly had nothing to do with medicine.

My Life, My Story is an activity at VA Boston that closes the gap between patient and provider by removing the titles of both parties, and simply replacing them both with "person." It was my honor to have a genuine person-to-person conversation with a 99-year-old veteran who presented to the urgent care during my shift. He was waiting on lab work to return, and kindly said he didn't mind telling me a little about his life to pass the time. I didn't know what to expect, but I sure wasn't expecting what he told me: this 99 year old man ballroom dances. Yes, dances, as in, at 99 years old, he continues to ballroom dance.

As he continued telling me about his life—his childhood, his time in World War II, his wife and children, his numerous jobs—it was clear how much love he has for dancing. It was in every story, every memory, and he relived them with such clarity and passion! It encompassed so much of his life; how he grew up, how he met his wife, how he transformed his own barn into a dance hall where he taught lessons to whoever was interested. I had become so enamored by the beauty and romance of his stories that I forgot we were even in an urgent care until the nurse notified me that his lab results returned and he could go home. A bit disappointed that my time with him was already over and I was back to reality, he gave me a wink and with a chuckle spoke the only life lesson he could impart on a young new provider: take up ballroom dancing.

I've had many interesting encounters with patients, some good, some bad, but never one like I had with this veteran. In the 30 minutes I was able to speak with him, he wasn't a patient waiting to go home, or even a withering nonagenarian; he was a man with a passion that has transcended so many years and so many styles. He was a man with continued love and excitement for something that had intertwined itself with him over the years. A love for something that quite literally kept him moving for 99 years. I sat there for quite some time after he left contemplating all that he had shared with me. Seventy years my senior, he left me with a lasting impression: perhaps the secret to living a long happy healthy life is to find something that makes your eyes light up, makes your heart beat in excitement, and clears your mind from the chaos of the world. Find that something and never let it go.