



## Mei-Lin Hsieh,

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# A CAREER for Life

Being in the teaching profession for nearly ten years, Teacher Mei-Lin Hsieh of the Nursing Department in Tzu Chi University, said proudly: "My students are now spreading all over the island and serving in all major medical centers." At the present time, Mei-Lin considers that her goals are to improve herself professionally and to teach her students to communicate effectively with patients so that they can be clinically ready as soon as they start their career.

### **Little brother's passing in the intensive care unit**

Mei-Lin came from a farming family in rural Ping Tung. Her parents wished their youngsters to become professionals. She went to a private middle school in Tainan after graduating from elementary school. Being used to the hard work on the farm, Mei-Lin said she could carry out heavy physical chores and laborious work. Even though she did not have a clear goal in life at that time, she anticipated to attend university after high school. She passed the exam easily and was ready for high school. But her mother had a different prospective for her. Mother thought nursing had a more secure future. Mei-Lin did not like the idea; she did not think the profession suited her personality. Nevertheless, Mei-Lin reluctantly went along with her mother's wishes.

While Mei-Lin was a third year student at the College of Nursing and Midwifery (Now "Fu-Ying University"), a disaster hit the family. In 1984 her little brother got into a car accident just two weeks before graduating from junior high school. He was sent to the intensive care unit in a general hospital. At that time, Mei-Lin's elder brother was busy studying in a university in the north, her parents were busy borrowing money for hospitalization, and her little sister was too young to face the tragedy. Mei-Lin was the only one available to take care of her little brother. She stayed by the door of the ICU throughout the entire period.

"My recollection was that the ICU was like a stainless wall that separated my little brother and the rest of us who waited anxiously."

At that time Mei-Lin's knowledge in intensive care was very limited; she listened to the beeping sounds of machines and witnessed her brother connected to the respirator, the electrocardiography and other devices.



“The first time I entered the ICU, they told me to contact my parents because my brother was in a critical condition. The second time I went in, doctors were busy conducting chest CPR to revive him...”

No miracle occurred that night.

### **Internship lit up the enthusiasm**

The passing away of her little brother did not motivate Mei-Lin to devote herself whole heartily into the nursing profession. Worse of all, resentment towards the ICU grew in her heart. She went back to school and continued to study passively, until the fifth year when her internship began.

At that time, fifth year students had to spend one whole year in hospitals for practical training. Mei-Lin went from hospital to hospital all over the northern, central and southern parts of Taiwan. She clearly remembers the time she spent in the surgical department in a central Taiwan hospital. Mei-Lin was taking care of a female patient in her twenties. The experience was so vivid that Mei-Lin still remembers the name of the patient. Like Mei-Lin’s little brother, she was a victim of a car accident. Her Glasgow coma scale was between 6 and 7, and needed around-the-clock care. The woman’s younger brother took leave of absence from his job and accompanied her to the hospital. For over a month, Mei-Lin observed with minute details from a nurse practitioner’s



Tzu Chi Commissioner Hsien-Hsien Lin Lu (middle) interacted with Mei-Lin during her casual visit to Hualien. The encounter resulted in Mei-Lin’s eventual settlement in eastern Taiwan.

point of view. She discovered the helplessness of the patients' family; she also developed skills to communicate with patients' family in order to provide the best service. Through patients' suffering, she realized that health is the best treasure in life. This experience led Mei-Lin to dedicate herself to nursing as her lifetime profession.

The three months she worked in Linkou Chang Gung Memorial Hospital was busy but rewarding and fulfilling. She gained valuable experiences from senior nurses. The senior staff extended their welcome for Mei-Lin to join the cardiac surgery department after her graduation from nursing school. Mei-Lin accepted the challenge and worked in Chang Gung after graduation.

### **Working inside the ICU – a coincidence?**

When Mei-Lin was filling her job application, she chose the “happy” departments such as obstetric, gynecology and pediatrics as her top three choices. For the fourth choice, she put cardiac surgery because of her experiences in practical training. But the cardiac surgery ICU needed help badly, so she was assigned to that unit. During the first couple of months on her new job, Mei-Lin was again surrounded by the noises of the ventilators and electrocardiography machines. That brought back the memory of her little brother. Especially when she was caring for patients with severe head injuries, she was always crying while serving the patient. Mei-Lin struggled and was on the verge of giving up. Her senior nursing partner encouraged her and said, “The training period is just three months. You can make it.” As time pass, Mei-Lin ended up staying in the ICU for over four years.

Looking back, it seems like Mei-Lin career was prearranged. It could be her little brother's calling for her to help patients like him. From then on, ICU became Mei-Lin's specialty.

### **Settling in Hualien**

When working in the intensive care unit, one cannot avoid confronting death. Mei-Lin asked herself: “How precious life is! Why am I the one to accompany the patients to their final days? Why do patients



Under the recommendation of Tzu Chi Hospital, Mei-Lin studied twice in the U.S. and received her master's degree. While in U.S., Mei-Lin was deeply inspired by the dedication of their senior nursing professionals.



die? Are there any better ways to say good-bye to a person?" She needed answers. Therefore, she joined a Buddhist club in the hospital in an attempt to seek answers.

In July of 1990, Mei-Lin's Buddhist club had a group visit to the He-Nan Temple in Hualien. At the end of the trip, just before boarding the train, they visited Buddhist Tzu Chi General Hospital. For reasons only heaven knows, as they walked into the hall, they saw Dharma Master Cheng Yen standing in front of the mosaic mural – "Buddha Cares for the Sick" and speaking to a group of people. Mei-Lin inched closer to Master Cheng Yen to have a clearer view. After a short while, tears started coming down her cheeks involuntarily; she was touched by what she heard. Right at that moment,

Mei-Lin went to the information desk and offered to make a donation as well as to become a Tzu Chi member. The receptionist introduced Mei-Lin to a commissioner dressed in blue chipao. The commissioner was the late Hsien-Hsien Lin Lu, who became Mei-Lin's god-mother in her later years. Lu asked Mei-Lin to make a subsequent visit to Tzu Chi Hospital and Mei-Lin accepted the invitation.

When Mei-Lin made her return visit, she was interviewed by a supervisor who asked Mei-Lin: "Are you married? Do you have a boyfriend?" Mei-Lin was puzzled by the questions. But the supervisor asked on, "There are very few single young men here. If you decide to come, the chances are you may not be able to find any male friend."

Mei-Lin was in her late twenties, but she was happy to be single. So, the supervisor urged her to start her new career as soon as possible.

Mei-Lin went back to her old job and worked through the busiest season of the year. Soon after the Chinese New Year of 1991, she moved to Hualien. Judging from Mei-Lin's personality, the managers of Chang Gung Hospital thought she would be tired of Hualien in a couple years and return to her old job. But it turned out Mei-Lin took roots in Tzu Chi.

### **From nursing to teaching**

Mei-Lin joined the ICU in Tzu Chi Hospital so she could make her utmost contribution in her new venture. She was promoted to deputy head nurse in six months. However, Mei-Lin was having difficulties to adjust her life in Hualien. In the mean time, she overheard her alma-mater recommending outstanding personnel to study abroad. Immediately, she figured it was time for her to pursuit advanced studies. Coincidentally, the nursing department head at that time, Professor Shun-Hua Wen, discussed the study opportunity with Mei-Lin. She accepted the offer and went to the United States in 1992. Mei-Lin obtained her bachelor degree from the University of Dubuque in 1994.

She returned to Taiwan and assumed the position of ICU head nurse. In August 1995, Mei-Lin again went to the United States for graduate school, majoring in ICU clinical nurse specialist. She received her master's degree from Case Western University in 1997. Both times, her study was recommended and fully paid for by Tzu Chi Hospital.

During her days of advanced studies, Mei-Lin closely interacted with clinical nursing practices and educational staff in the United States. She gained significant knowledge both in her profession and the way of life in the United States.

"My American schoolmates consider nursing as their lifetime career. No one ever considered a career change. They are the backbone of nursing in the country. Usually they work on three shift rotations, and they all have to take care of their families."

In addition to their fortitude, the nurses must have a way to sustain their perseverance. One of her professors, during the time when Mei-Lin was working toward her master's degree, taught her that nursing



professionals can live normal lives.

“The skin of my hands is coarse; like the hands of the laborers. It used to make me feel embarrassed. But the hands of my professor are even coarser. She proudly told me that she owns a farm. And she has to milk cows and do all sorts of farm chores every day after nursing.”

From this and other little things, Mei-Lin discovered that nursing personnel could have a lifestyle they wish to enjoy, in addition to their professional life.



As one of the pioneer teachers of the Standardized Patient Program in the Tzu Chi Hospital, Mei-Lin teaches her volunteer patients on medical knowledge and symptoms of the illnesses. The standardized patients not only test the medical students, but also nursing students as well.

## **Creative teaching for future nursing professionals**

Upon returning to Taiwan, Mei-Lin became a nursing supervisor in the Nursing Department. She was responsible for recruiting young medical staff and involved in interviewing college graduates. While doing this, she discovered that there was a big gap between knowledge and experience. That is, the younger nurses usually start from scratch when they enter clinical practice. As she was finding solutions to fill the gaps, the Nursing Department Head of Tzu Chu University, Yun-Fang Tsai, contacted her. Tzu Chi University offered Mei-Lin a teaching position. In 1997, Mei-Lin became a part-time instructor in the Nursing Department. Later in 2002, she devoted whole heartedly to nursing education.

While her career bloomed, Mei-Lin got married and started to raise children at the same time, Mei-Lin's obstetrics attending physician, Dr. Sheng-Po Kao, was in charge of the "Standardized Patient Center". Dr. Kao found Mei-Lin's cheerful and positive personality suitable to be a teacher at the center. After childbirth, in 2007, Mei-Lin was invited to the training class for the new teachers. Meanwhile, she combined the "Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE)" with the "Situational Teaching Approach" into her unique teaching techniques. In 2009, Mei-Lin also developed a new course plan for Tzu Chi University in "Physical Examination and Assessment", which was recognized by the Taiwan Department of Education as an outstanding plan. In 2010, she organized the "Eastern Taiwan Life Protection Nursing Competition", and integrated the idea of the standardized patient into nursing curriculum for the first time. Her approaches in teaching and evaluation were affirmed and well received by her students.

To Mei-Lin, education is a continuous sharing process. Her philosophy is "the most beautiful nurse is the one who knows how to care for people". She encourages herself to transplant the beauty of nursing to her students, so that the younger nurses respect their career and bravely face any obstacles they may encounter. When students develop a positive attitude, they can step into clinics with confidence. That is the biggest reward for a teacher. Mei-Lin appreciates what she has received in life and energetically dedicates her life to the area of nursing education.