

From a Family Where Nobody Worked to a Life in Nursing: My Journey of Finding Purpose and Freedom.

By Lisa Thomas

When I look back at my life at the age of 55, one of the things that amazes me most is how different my life has become from the life I grew up around.

I grew up in a family where working and studying were not really part of our culture. My grandparents, on both my father's and mother's sides, never worked. My parents never worked either and were dependent



on benefits. There was no expectation that I would go to university, build a career or achieve professional qualifications. Nobody around me had followed that path, so I did not grow up believing that education and professional success were necessarily for people like me.

I did not really finish school, and for a long time I had very little confidence in my academic ability. Nursing was certainly not something I had planned to do. Then, quite unexpectedly, my life began to change.

I had a next-door neighbour and friend called Mary. When I was around 20, I started helping to look after her ailing mother while Mary went away to study nursing. I had no idea at the time that this simple act of helping someone would eventually change the entire direction of my life.

Mary was studying nursing, and whenever she came home, I became fascinated by the books she brought with her. I would read them and ask questions about what she was learning. I found myself genuinely interested in everything she was doing. Nursing began to open up a world I had never known existed.

Mary noticed my interest. One day, she suggested that I consider doing an Access to Nursing course. **My first reaction was fear.** Nobody in my family had ever studied for a course. Nobody had gone to university. I had not completed school in the conventional way, so the idea of enrolling on a course and eventually becoming a nurse seemed almost impossible.

I was daunted because I had no example to follow. I did not have a parent, grandparent or relative who could tell me, "This is how you do it." I was entering completely unfamiliar territory. But I decided to try.

I enrolled on an Access to Nursing course at around 21. One of the things that made it possible for me was that the course did not necessarily require the traditional grades that I did not have. It gave people like me another route into education.

The opportunity provided by Access to Nursing

For me, the greatest advantage of Access to Nursing was that it gave me a second chance. Traditional education can sometimes make people feel that if they did not achieve certain grades or follow the expected path when they were young, their opportunities are over. An Access course can challenge that belief.

It gave me the opportunity to develop my academic skills, learn how to study and, perhaps most importantly, believe that I was capable of becoming a nurse.

I had Mary's support and guidance throughout that period.

Her encouragement made a huge difference. She had already shown me what was possible, and she became someone I could look up to. Eventually, I passed my Access to Nursing course.

I then went to university and studied for a nursing diploma, which was the qualification available at the time. After three years of study, hard work and many challenges, I qualified as a Registered General Nurse (RGN). For someone who had grown up believing that studying and working were things other people did, qualifying as a nurse was a huge achievement.

What nursing has given me

Nursing has given me far more than a job.

It has given me independence, confidence, skills, friendships and a sense of purpose. It has allowed me to meet people from many different backgrounds and to be part of a profession where what you do can genuinely make a difference to another person's life.

There have been difficult days, of course. Nursing can be physically and emotionally demanding. It can involve long hours, pressure and situations that stay with you long after you have finished a shift.

But there are also enormous rewards.

One of the things I value most is being able to support other people—not only the patients and their families, but also my colleagues. Having worked in nursing for many years, I understand that everyone needs encouragement sometimes. I try to support colleagues, share my experience and help create an environment where people feel that they are not facing challenges alone.

Nursing at 55: the freedom of agency work

Today, at 55, I still work as a nurse, but my working life looks very different from when I first qualified.

I now work flexible hours and days as an agency nurse.

For me, this has been one of the great advantages of nursing. Flexible working gives me greater control over my time. I can choose shifts that fit around the rest of my life, rather than feeling that work has to control every aspect of my life.

Working flexibly can also provide variety. Different workplaces, teams and experiences can help keep nursing interesting and allow you to continue learning.

For healthcare professionals who have spent years working fixed patterns, flexible agency work can provide an opportunity to regain some control over their working lives. Of course, agency nursing also comes with responsibilities.

Flexibility does not mean taking the job less seriously. Patients still need safe, compassionate and professional care, whatever type of contract a nurse has.

Don't let nursing become your whole identity

One lesson I would give to other healthcare professionals is this: **don't allow your job to become your entire life.**

Nursing is an important profession, but we are people before we are nurses.

It is easy to become stuck in one place, particularly when you have spent many years in the same profession. You can become so focused on shifts, responsibilities and the next working day that you forget to make time for yourself.

Outside work, one of the things I love doing is walking and sightseeing. Being outdoors, exploring different places and simply having time away from the healthcare environment helps me relax and recharge.

Those simple activities remind me that there is a whole world outside the hospital, care home or workplace.

My advice to other healthcare professionals

My advice is simple: **don't underestimate yourself.**

Your background does not have to determine your future.

I came from a family where nobody had worked and nobody had pursued higher education. I had not really finished school, and when I first considered nursing, I was frightened because I had no idea whether I was capable.

But sometimes you don't need to know exactly how you are going to get there. You just need someone to encourage you to take the first step. For me, that person was Mary. Her decision to suggest an Access to Nursing course changed my life. What started with me reading her nursing books eventually became a career that has lasted decades.

At 55, I am still working, still supporting colleagues, still caring for people—and, importantly, I have discovered that work can be part of a fulfilling life without having to be the whole of it.

My story began in a family where working and studying were not the norm. It continued with an unexpected opportunity to care for someone, a friend's encouragement, some nursing books and a decision to take a chance on myself.

Sometimes the biggest changes in our lives begin with something very small. So, if you are reading this and wondering whether it is too late to change direction, my message is: **it is never too late to learn, grow and discover what you are capable of.** And healthcare is the best place to do so. So, now I would love to ask you:

What is your story?