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Survival Flight nurse thrives by taking it one step at a time

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Gina Russell was one step away from reaching her dream job.

It was late 2014 and she had already completed five months of a rigorous six-month orientation program to become a Survival Flight nurse. Gina's new position represented the culmination of a career at UMHS that spanned nearly two decades.

But on a cold, wintry drive home after working a night shift, everything changed.

"A truck was driving recklessly in the bad weather, crossed over from the other side of the road and hit me head-on," Gina said.

She was knocked unconscious only to awaken to paramedics cutting her out of her car. "I suffered a concussion and had a severe hand injury, but the worst injury was to my foot. Doctors had to perform emergency surgery to reattach it," Gina said.

"It was frightening. That night in the hospital, I was wondering if I'd ever be able to work my way back to Survival Flight. But I also thought to myself, 'this isn't going to stop me.'"

It didn't.

A life-long dream

Gina's love of flying goes back to her teenage years.

"I was fascinated by airplanes," Gina said. "Then one day while I was in college, my mother told me about UMHS helicopters that are used to transport patients. I already wanted to become a nurse, so when I found out about Survival Flight, I was hooked. I knew that's where I had to be."

She moved home to complete her EMT training, a requirement for all Survival Flight nurses. She was then accepted into the U-M School of Nursing and began her career at UMHS as a technician in the Trauma Burn unit. After receiving her degree, Trauma Burn brought her back as an RN before she transferred to the Pediatric ICU.

Eleven years passed as Gina and her husband focused on their family and their three children. But her Survival Flight dreams were never grounded entirely.

"A few years ago, we decided that one of us should stay at home to take care of the kids," Gina said. "My husband volunteered and told me to go after what I've always wanted. He encouraged me to live my dream."

A foot in the door

Gina met with the Survival Flight team and by mid-2014, she was hired as a flight nurse.

All Survival Flight nurses must have at least five years of nursing experience, be dually licensed as an RN and EMT and have familiarity with treating both adult and pediatric trauma patients.

And that's before the six-month training process begins. The training includes becoming familiar with various aircrafts — Survival Flight utilizes two helicopters and one airplane — and perfecting the techniques of safely and quickly transporting critically-ill patients.

"We're such a close family at Survival Flight," Gina said. "And part of the reason for that is we've all gone through this process. We all know what it took to arrive where we are today."

For Gina, the process took a little longer, as she had to undergo rehabilitation and physical therapy following her accident.

"Everyone in the department was so supportive during my recovery," Gina said. "They helped get me through this."

By last November, Gina was finally in the air.

Feeling 'incredibly fortunate'

Believe it or not, Gina's brand-new Survival Flight uniform may have saved her career the night of her accident.

"My doctors told me I could have completely lost my foot if I hadn't been wearing my uniform that night. The high boots I was wearing literally saved me from having my foot amputated. I'm incredibly fortunate."

Now, Gina takes steps to keep other trauma patients safe. She's involved in up to three flights per day, either transporting patients from another hospital to UMHS — where they can get a higher level of care — or retrieving donated organs.

“You never know what you're getting into each shift,” Gina said. “You may have nothing to do for an entire day or you may be sent to Florida with no more than five minutes of warning.”

For everyone in Survival Flight, patient care is the No. 1 goal.

“We have the opportunity to save someone's life, or at least get them here to UMHS where amazing people make miracles happen every day,” Gina said.

And she won't let her own struggles get in the way. “I sometimes still get pain in my leg and it's always a little sore. But I can deal with the pain if it means I'm helping others,” Gina said.

“The greatest part of my job is when we take care of somebody and they come back to thank us for what we did. That makes it all worth it.”

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