Mom of preterm baby is becoming a nurse

Nursing shortage helped reveal her ‘real purpose’ as caregiver for her son

Ashley R. Williams

Kadijah Keys didn’t need acope to become the hero her baby needed. The birth of her twins came at 22 weeks—and then the death of one newborn weeks later—afflicted the 28-year-old Ohio mom in an unexpected way.

When a shortage of home care nurses presented itself, Keys, a former psychiatric nurse who once managed becoming an FBI agent—a shifted path—decided to enroll in nursing school. “I was like, ‘If nobody else can do it, I can do it and I’m just going to have to try until I do it all week.” Keys told USA TODAY.

Keys is set to graduate from Hondros College of Nursing in Ohio in September. She made the decision last semester, inspired by her son and a lack of nursing availability to give up her plans to become a FBI agent and pursue a career as a nurse.

Kadijah Keys, 28, is enrolled at the Hondros College of Nursing in Ohio. Keys, who made the decision last semester, was inspired by her son and a lack of nursing availability to give up her plans to become a FBI agent and pursue a career as a nurse.

In November 2020, Keys scooped on her drive to work at a prison system employee. Her water broke. She went to Miami Valley Hospital in Dayton, Ohio, where they told her there was nothing they could do. If they delivered the baby at that time, doctors said they wouldn’t be able to save the baby. “I broke down,” Keys said.

She was sent home only to be awakened by experiencing back pain the next morning. Keys was rushed to the University of Cincinnati Medical Center, where the twins held on until the 22-week mark. “The point at which doctors were able to begin delivery.”

“School was the scarcest experience ever,” Keys said, “So much uncertainty, and doctors asking if you do or don’t want to save your kid.”

The premature babies stood only a 50% survival chance, possibly dying during labor or being born with traumatic brain injuries, she said. On Nov. 9, 2020, Amir’s Keys was born weighing 15 ounces. Three days later, his twin, Amir, came into the world weighing one pound.

Amir died 33 days after birth. On Nov. 21, “I never got to hold him until he passed away,” Keys said.

Amir kept fighting. He survived an emergency surgery at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital—a procedure not usually done at the hospital on babies younger than 25 weeks. Keys said he spent 63 days in the hospital.

“Not many kids spend over a year in the NICU,” her mother said. “He was just a fighting baby.”

Since then, the child has undergone five surgeries, including four major procedures in five separate days, Keys told USA TODAY.

Amir was diagnosed with volvulus, a condition causing the intestines to twist and obstruct the bowel. “Volvulus can leave someone brain dead because it cuts off blood supply to major organs,” Keys explained. “He’s in a coma and makes her feel like a ‘superhero,’ Keys said.

“I feel like a superhero for him”

When the time came for Amir to go home, a nursing shortage left the family waiting seven months for her care.

In August, when the family left the hospital, there were seven nurses who provided care to Amir, who includes handling his feeding tube, medications, cleaning, getting him to and from appointments, and providing overnight fluids.

By December, the Keys were down to two nurses who came to their home. “We were approved for 10 hours a week, but due to the nursing shortage, we currently receive about 60 hours a week,” Keys said.

Amir’s children’s hospital didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.

Health care burnout and caregiver fatigue might have contributed to the shortage of nurses, who in 2019 reported being “very satisfied” with their current job, the latest in a series of studies showing that nurses, who are crucial to patient care, might be the last to have their needs met.

“Those who work the toughest jobs in America,” said Wendy Raudenbush, the assistant director of nursing at Hondros College who also is Keys’ instructor. “We have increased expectations on nurses and health care providers with...”

Texas woman turns 100, celebrating life of service

‘There’s no hospital like it,’ says Texas Children’s, where she volunteered for 6 years

Ashley R. Williams

Six decades, more than 10,000 hours and 100 trips around the sun add up to a lifetime of service for dedicated volunteer and centenarian Elaine Kupper.

Kupper, who celebrated her 100th birthday in November, devoted 61 years to volunteering at Texas Children’s Hospital before retiring in 2015. She is the longest-serving volunteer at the largest pediatric hospital in the U.S.

The Buffalo, New York, native, who relocated to Houston when she was 12, started volunteering at the hospital just more than two weeks after it opened in February 1956. Her level of dedication evolved: she began to take Spanish lessons so she could better guide Hispanic and Latinx families around the complex.

“I just loved being with people,” Kupper told USA TODAY. “It’s the best. That’s no hospital like it.”

Wearing many hats to serve others

Dressed in her red-and-white uniform, Kupper supported the hospital’s patients, families and staff through various roles such as serving at the snack bar, driving wheelchair and menstera rounding, filling a 45-yeard old at the hospital gift shop, delivering mail and leading tours of the facility.

“10 of us that were the first to start volunteering, and I lasted longer than anybody. I lived to the be 100,” Kupper said.

After her retirement in 2015, she still deviated her time to Texas Children’s volunteer services department when she could.

“Elaine was always somebody who was just our living historian,” said Paige Schulz, Texas Children’s assistant vice president of patient support services.

“She was somebody that was so enjoyable to treat to great volunteer and staff, and really made everybody’s day better.”

Adding a special touch to snack bars

Before Texas Children’s introduced McDonald’s, Kupper was the first volunteer to serve snacks and drinks at the snack bar.

Kupper became known for greeting physicians by name—not by their sandwich orders, which she recalls to this day.

“I had three favorite doctors that came every day,” she said; we’d call them Mr. Tusca, Mr. Flagg and Mr. Boos Brown, Kupper said, adding that Mr. Boos always preferred cash and the baked potato on his sandwich.

Kupper’s mother was a mother of two young children in her early days of volunteering at Texas Children’s Hospital. Her family has since grown to include four grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

A unique friendship with a unique patient

David Wetton, who was known as the “huggable guy,” was born without an immune system at Texas Children’s Hospital in September 1997. Wetton had a non-genet-ic disorder called severe combined immunodeficiency, and he lived his en- tire life exposed to a plastic bubble envi- ronment to protect him.

“I had tours with a walk and wave to him and say hello,” said Kupper, who not- ed that Wetton’s bubble—which doctors could touch him using only arm- length gloves—grew in size by age 10.

“I was with him from the day he was born to the day he died when he was 12 years old,” Kupper said.

Kupper’s daughter, Laurie Bricker, told USA TODAY that her mother was the only family member of the hospital’s auxiliary invited to Wetton’s private funeral in 1998.

“His family invited me to him many times so I was very, very, very close to the most important thing was the day he died,” Kupper said.

“David’s mother” came to the inform-ation desk and said, I held him in my arms at 12 years old for the first time; I never knew his hair was so soft,” she recalled.

Honoring a dedicated lifelong volunteer

Kupper’s lifetime commitment to vol- unteers has not gone unrewarded. Texas Children’s nominated the mother of two for the Mayo’s Award she won—for her service to the hospital. The hospital’s volunteer program is also named in Kupper’s honor.

In 2000, 15 years after her death, she was also given the recognition of be- ing a recipient and inductee in the volunteer halls of fame.

“Elaine was a very honored volunteer,” said Bonnie Nettles, Texas Children’s president and CEO.

Mark Wallace gifford Kupper with a kind note and flowers for his 100th birthday; Bricker said.

“From the bottom of my heart, thank you for everything you did to make a big difference in my life,” she said.

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