

---

# Kathy Johnson MPH, BSN, FNP, RN

Her latest nursing role is one that rolls

By Kathy Johnson

MPH, BSN, FNP, RN

In attempts to motivate my children to choose their careers, I have frequently touted the flexibility of nursing. "Nursing provides a tremendous number of possibilities and ways to use the role. You can go almost anywhere and get a job, and it can be in anything from business to teaching, occupational health to counseling, hospital to office practice," I would say.

Well, those words have come back to haunt me. Little did I imagine that I would one day be driving a truck in my role as a nurse and nurse practitioner.

There was a community action group, Wayne Action Teams for Community Health, and a private physician in Wayne County who had become aware that large numbers of people in the county were unable to receive medical care because they lacked insurance, Medicare or Medicaid. They teamed up to write a grant proposal to Duke Endowment to purchase a mobile medical unit and develop a program.

The mobile unit was to travel to various parts of the county on a regular basis, providing health care access to people with financial and transportation problems, seeing people in their own localities. The hospital would recruit volunteers who would help register the patients on the unit. Fifteen physicians agreed to assist in seeing patients when necessary.

Upon receiving the grant, WATCH purchased a fully equipped, 40-foot mobile unit and began searching for a family nurse practitioner. Dr. Frank Leak, from the Medical Society Foundation, asked me to come with him to Goldsboro to give them some information on the requirements and regulations of nurse practitioners. After meeting the people, and enthused by the idea of giving free care to such a needy population, I applied for the job myself.

The "nitty-gritty" details of driving and maintaining the truck, emptying the sewage tank, filling the water tank, stocking and cleaning the unit, plus discovering the most strategic communities, churches, and shelters for sites to visit, and getting the word out to people who don't generally get newspapers, were not the most glamorous parts of the job. Then there were intake forms and medical records to be developed, as well as policies to be established and written. I was also to be the nurse, laboratory technician, medical records person, social worker and health educator. The tasks seemed fairly overwhelming.

However, each day that care can be given to someone who has health problems, such as diabetes or hypertension, and who has gone months or years without medication or re, makes all of the effort extremely worthwhile.

The stories people tell of their struggles are incredible. Many of them are working, but at low paying jobs that do not provide insurance, such as self-employed mechanics, waitresses, or workers in day care centers or rest homes. The people are very appreciative, and the number of "blessings on you" and hugs I've received are numerous and humbling.

The WATCH Mobile Unit started seeing patients in August 2000, and went full time in September. By mid-May 2001, 850 people had been seen in 1,400 encounters. More than \$10,000 worth of medications had been obtained from patient assistance programs that drug companies sponsor.

Many people were referred to WATCH from mental health, social services and public health departments. Referrals were made to vocational rehabilitation or to surgical consults for those people who needed them. The local hospital and private physicians have taken referrals when appropriate.

In the beginning, I could see people stare as if to say, "Who is that little old lady and why is she driving that truck?" Now they wave and smile. Wayne County is becoming proud of its program, and I am reinforced in my notion that if you are a nurse or nurse practitioner, you can go almost anywhere and do almost anything!