

How Broadlawns is changing lives in its poor north-side neighborhood

Kevin Hardy, kmhardy@dmreg.com

Published 4:34 p.m. CT Sept. 21, 2017 | Updated 12:43 a.m. CT Sept. 25, 2017



(Photo: Brian Powers/The Register)

For years, Cassandra Campa has wanted to work in the medical field.

But after what she described as a rough childhood, the 24-year-old struggled to provide for her five children. There was little time or money for non-essentials like job training and further education.

"It was a trap," she said, "living paycheck-to-paycheck."

After leaving Lincoln High School and earning an equivalency certificate, she had worked some jobs in nursing homes and was most recently employed at a local McDonald's.

Now, she says, her life has completely turned around.

She was among the first to benefit from a new partnership between Broadlawns Medical Center and Urban Dreams, the Des Moines nonprofit founded by former legislator Wayne Ford.

Called Training and Educating Adults for a Career in Healthcare, or TEACH, the competitive program pays workers to receive free training as certified nursing assistants and promises a full-time job upon completion.

"This was like my dream," Campa says, dressed in fresh navy scrubs after completing the program. "It's an open door to a better life that I didn't get to experience growing up. It's really changed a lot."

Campa credits the team of instructors and hospital staffers who pushed her throughout the experience — and still remain involved. They helped her get through the tougher parts of the curriculum, she said. And they supported her when she wanted to drop out — her brother died in a Broadlawns bed after suffering a gunshot wound to the head.

"They stuck with me through the entire thing," she said. "Broadlawns is like a family."

Since completing the program, she's made plans to move her family out of their apartment and into a house. And she says her children's lives are already looking to be brighter than her own childhood, which lacked parental stability.

But she won't savor the success for too long.

Taking a break from one of her first shifts in the hospital's coffee shop, Campa laid out her vision for the future: She wants to go on to study nursing. Eventually, she wants to pursue medical school.

"This is not going to be the ending," she said.

'I want to change this community'

Ford, who will [soon retire from Urban Dreams](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/local/des-moines/2016/12/04/wayne-ford-retire-urban-dreams-nonprofit/94963590/) ([/story/news/local/des-moines/2016/12/04/wayne-ford-retire-urban-dreams-nonprofit/94963590/](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/local/des-moines/2016/12/04/wayne-ford-retire-urban-dreams-nonprofit/94963590/)), credits the vision of Broadlawns CEO Jody Jenner for bringing the program to life.



Cassandra Campa, 24 of Des Moines, poses for a portrait in the Medical and Surgery wing of Broadlawns Medical Center on Wednesday, Sept. 20, 2017, in Des Moines. Broadlawns and Urban Dreams have partnered to provide a jobs training program that pays low-income participants to train as CNAs with the promise of a full-time job at Broadlawns upon completion. Campa started training at Broadlawns in April and has been working full time there since August. (Photo: Brian Powers/The Register)

He recalls a meeting months ago in the chief executive's top-floor corner office, where windows overlook the homes surrounding the hospital campus.

"He said, 'Wayne, I want to change this community,'" Ford said. "It blew my mind."

Ford and Jenner visited Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, which created a similar program to better connect with its surrounding neighborhood.

Broadlawns, like many health care organizations, struggles to fill openings for CNAs, also known as nurse technicians.

[Buy Photo](#)



Wayne Ford, president and founder of Urban Dreams, in 2015. (Photo: Register file photo)

But more broadly, Jenner said he wanted to do something to improve the economic health of north Des Moines neighborhoods. He says hospitals are good at treating patients within their own walls, but can lose focus on their wider communities.

"We want to become that economic anchor for the north side," Jenner said. "I think having been in these neighborhoods for 100 years, we understand them."

Broadlawns, which is owned by Polk County taxpayers, has [thrived in recent years \(/story/news/health/2017/03/23/once-threadbare-public-hospital-opens-22-million-addition/99559582/\)](#) after nearing financial collapse more than a decade ago. Boosted by revenue from newly covered patients under Obamacare, the hospital has undertaken a five-year, \$60 million plan to rebuild and expand.

As the safety net hospital's coffers have improved, Jenner said the organization began to turn its focus outward.

The hospital just celebrated the first graduates of its teenage and adult CNA training programs and plans to begin classes with new groups in October. Over about five or six months, students learn in classrooms and in clinical settings. The coursework covers the basics to pass nursing assistant exams and teaches soft skills that make participants more employable.

Each class of new teenagers and adults costs about \$30,000, which comes from the hospital's reserves.

"We were never able to do anything like this in the past," Jenner said.

Ford vividly remembers "the noise, the blood, the filth" at public hospitals in his native Washington, D.C.

"But that was OK because we didn't have the money to pay for services," he said. "So, I never had a great deal of respect for county hospitals."

That's all changing, he said. At least here.

"This is not typical in America, yet alone in Iowa," Ford said of the CNA program. "He's changing the culture and thinking of how people look at county hospitals."

[Buy Photo](#)



Broadlawns Medical Center's new \$22 million, four-story addition will house dental, mental-health, addiction treatment, pain medicine and family practice programs. (Photo: Tony Leys/The Register)

'These kids are going to make more money than their parents'

Participants earn \$10 per hour during the training, Jenner said. And upon successful completion, nursing assistants start out at a minimum of \$12 an hour, with differential pay for various department and shifts.

Eventually, they can earn up to \$20 per hour, he said. That's considerably higher than the industry average.

In Iowa, nursing assistants earn an average of \$13.13 per hour, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics \(https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_ia.htm\)](https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_ia.htm). That's considerably lower than Iowa's overall average wage of \$20.93 per hour.

The low wages led another job training program, [Project Iowa \(http://www.projectiowa.org/\)](http://www.projectiowa.org/), to drop its CNA program over concerns that the jobs would not provide a livable wage.

"It was keeping them in poverty," Project Iowa executive director Julie Fugenschuh said of CNA graduates of her program. "It was a cycle we couldn't figure out how to break."

Ford brushes off questions about CNA wages. Within Broadlawns' 50314 ZIP code, the U.S. Census Bureau reports an average per capita income of about \$15,800 per year — about half the number for the wider Des Moines metro area.

"Twelve dollars an hour in this neighborhood? Give me a break," Ford said. "Some of these kids are going to make more money than their parents."

[Buy Photo](#)



Broadlawns Medical Center is a public hospital serving Polk County, Iowa. (Photo: Register file photo)

The occupation is known for its high turnover and low pay, said Di Findley, executive director of the Iowa Caregivers Association, which advocates for CNAs and home care aides.

She applauded the Broadlawns and Urban Dreams partnership. But she said the industry is in need of wider public policies that help attract and retain health care workers.

"I think it goes to show you just how desperate some of these employers are to fill these jobs," she said.

It's not uncommon for nursing homes and other health care organizations to fund CNA training, Findley said. Certified nursing homes and boarding care homes are required to reimburse a nursing assistant for the cost of training.

But she noted that other factors like transportation, child care and the ongoing need to earn wages can get in the way of completing training. And once employed, many leave the profession because of low wages.

"If they can't earn enough to survive they simply can't stay in the field no matter how rewarding they may find the work," she said.

'You don't take it for granted'

As her high school graduation approached, Esther Kamanda worked two part-time jobs and looked around for full-time work at local Hy-Vee stores and clothing stores.

Then, she learned about the CNA program.

"Thank God I got this opportunity," she said.

The 19-year-old graduated from Roosevelt High School in the spring.

Her family immigrated to the United States in 2010 from West Congo. She now lives with her sister and brother-in-law in Des Moines.

On her shifts floating around Broadlawns' various departments, she does everything from checking blood pressure and taking temperatures to working one-on-one with psychiatric patients. She has trouble identifying her favorite part of the job.

"Everything," she said.



Esther Kamanda is pictured here in the emergency room at Broadlawns Medical Center.

Kamanda's training as a certified nursing assistant was provided through a partnership between Broadlawns and Urban Dreams. (Photo: Contributed photo/Broadlawns Medical Center)

Her dream is to become a registered nurse, and she plans to soon start classes at Des Moines Area Community College.

Health care runs in Kamanda's family: Her late father was a doctor and her mother is a nurse in New York.

"She loves it. She's proud of me," Kamanda said.

She considers herself lucky. It's hard to say how long it would have taken her to save enough money to pay for CNA courses on her own, she said.

"You don't take it for granted," she said. "There's a lot of people out there who want to be in this program."

Read or Share this story: <http://dmreg.co/2ygWLK0>