

BETH

By Susan May

"Do you want to help me weigh him?" Beth, my son's ICU nurse asked me.

"Oh, can I please?"

That question would not have been such a big deal if it had not been for the fact my son, Nick, had been in ICU for four weeks.

Nick was born with a congenital heart problem. At five days old he had his first heart surgery and required another a three months old. That surgery was the one he was recovering from when Beth asked if I wanted to help.

There was a complication during surgery and because of that Nick was unable to get off the respirator. A respirator is the machine that breaths for you. Nick had been in ICU on this machine for four long weeks. He did not eat for himself and lay on a bed, flat on his back all day. Except for the few times he was carefully rolled on to his side to prevent bed scores.

I did not get to care for him in any way, so when Beth asked if I wanted to help I was surprised and ecstatic. I could be a mom again, caring for my child. Beth understood my need to be involved in Nick's care as much as possible.

She knew it was a struggle for me to spend my days waiting for there to be a change, any change.

Beth was Nick's nurse four out of the seven weeks he spent on the respirator. The nurses in ICU worked twelve hour shifts, with four days on, three days off. The Head nurse tried to keep the same nurse with the same patient as much as possible. I was grateful for that because it gave me a sense of security to have the same person caring for Nick. I developed a trusting relationship with Beth. As the days went by I realized that Nick had become more than just a job to Beth.

She was tall and thin with dark curly hair. She was married but had no children yet. Beth cared and was attentive to my feelings. She let me stay at Nick's bedside for as long as possible each day. She was sensitive to my need to help and care for Nick. She would give me little jobs to do so I could be involved. She let me help as much as his machinery, wires and tubes would allow. The one time during the day I got to hold him was when he was being weighed. Even that was for a few brief moments. It was heaven while it lasted. Bathing him I could easily do, if he was having a good day, but that did not happen often. I made sure that I was visiting when it was time for his bath so that I could do it.

On Nick's fourth and fifth month birthday Beth was the one who made birthday cards for his bed. She did something very simple but extremely important -- she remembered. She also made a large poster with his schedule on it. This was to keep him having some type of structured during the day, because he was living in a world where the lights were on all the time and there was continuous noise. A schedule add normalcy. Beth worried over Nick and was as anxious as we were for him to get off the respirator.

She always made an effort to say something positive about how Nick was doing each day. She worked at trying to keep my spirits up even when Nick would have a set back. She would listen to me tell stories about my other three children, and ask questions about them. That helped me feel not so home sick for them, because I was only getting to see them once a week, when they came to visit. Beth became the smiling face I depended on each day.

After a month she was assigned to another patient. I was sad to see her go, but I understood. It was for her benefit because the situation with Nick was depressing for her to face every time she came to work. Coming to work daily to a patient who was not getting better very quickly was difficult. She had to be on her toes all the time, and not get to attached. The head nurse thought that it was

getting to be too much for her, and it was in her best interest and Nick's for another nurse to take over her shift.

Beth still checked on Nick and me when she was there. She always wanted to know how I was doing, including the rest of my family. By this time it was no longer just a nurse/parent relationship, but had become a friendship. This friendship would last for years. She and her husband spent a Thanksgiving with us at our home and I still enjoy hearing from her fifteen years later every Christmas.

Nick did finally get off the respirator and went on to receive a heart transplant a year later. The care Beth gave him during those long weeks in ICU helped me to feel comfortable about being back in ICU when Nick was transplanted.

Beth was a great nurse. Pediatric ICU nurses are a special breed of people to begin with and Beth was a stand out among the great ones. She was just the right nurse this mother needed at the time. Pediatric nurses not only care for the child -- they care for the parents.