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# Swartz Creek nurse practitioner travels a long road to a rewarding life

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'My kids are my reason, they are the reason I do everything,' said Nurse Practitioner Kay Southern about her wall of photos of her children on a cork board in front of her desk at Hamilton Community Health Network in Mt. Morris Thursday afternoon. Southern was pregnant with her first of three children at the age of 19 and has worked from living on welfare to help put her through school at Michigan State University. Southern has worked with the Community Health Network for the past 18 months.

MT. MORRIS TOWNSHIP, Michigan — At age 19, Kay Southern got a reality check in the form of a blue line.

She was pregnant, alone and soon to be on welfare. But she was determined to give her son the life he deserved.

"I knew nothing would ever be the same," Southern said. "I knew right then and there it was time to grow up."

Twenty-two years later, Southern, 41, of Swartz Creek has reached her ultimate professional goal of becoming a nurse practitioner and — with a little help — is virtually debt-free.

Working at Hamilton Community Health Network, 7057 N. Clio Road, in Mt. Morris Township, Southern just completed her first year with the National Health Service Corps.

NHSC is a federal program with the mission of recruiting and retaining clinicians for

underserved communities. In return, the program repays student loans for those it accepts in the program.

When Southern finally completed her education, she had \$48,000 in school loans.

"There was nothing like the day that I got the letter (saying my loans were paid off) for a job I already loved," she said.

'The best-kept secret'

If wasn't for federal programs, Southern wouldn't be where she is today, she said.

"I can't tell you how much I recommend how people should get involved (in NHSC)," Southern said. "It's like the best-kept secret."

Rebecca Spitzgo, National Health Service Corps director, said those who are part of NHSC are very passionate

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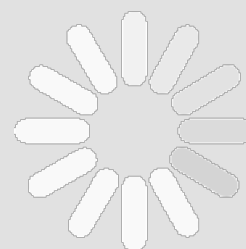
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about serving their communities, and they often become leaders.

"They are able to follow their heart and serve where they feel they need to serve without worrying about the money," she said.

NHSC has an initial two-year commitment, in which up to \$50,000 of student loans can be repaid. The individual must already be hired at an approved site in an underserved area.

The site has to serve all patients and accept Medicare and Medicaid.

Spitzgo said there are more than 10,000 approved sites in the United States, and there are about 9,000 vacancies.

The hope is that each person involved in NHSC will put down roots and choose to serve in the underserved area for more than the two years.

Southern said she doesn't plan to go anywhere anytime soon.

"I'm very proud to be part of this," she said. "It feels we are right at the core of the mission of what we are supposed to do."

A long road to a new life

The journey to get where she is today was anything but easy for Southern.

A few weeks after her son, Justin, was born in 1988, Southern started classes at Baker College in business administration, because the waiting list for nursing was so long.

"After I started working with that degree, I needed to go back," she said. "I wanted to be able to take care of my child."

In 1992, after daughter Mikayla was born, she started nursing classes at Mott Community College.

She pushed through the waiting list and, in 1997, she graduated as a licensed practical nurse.

Southern started working at Hurley Medical Center in 1996 as a nurse in training.

"That was my first medical job and quite an education," she said.

After becoming an registered nurse in 1998, Southern worked at Hurley until she was hired at Genesys Regional Medical Center in 2000. She worked while she obtained her bachelor's degree in nursing and took classes on site at the hospital.

In 2004, daughter Abigail was born. Southern began teaching nursing part-time at MCC and taking graduate courses at Michigan State University.

During her clinics, she was assigned to the Hamilton clinic, where she eventually was hired.

Daughter Mikayla Endicott, 18, said there were times her mom wanted to give up, but she didn't.

"She deserves where she's at now," Endicott said. "I hope I can stick with college, too, as hard as she worked."

An opportunity to be a role model

On April 6, 2009, Southern started work as a nurse practitioner at Hamilton Community Health Network, and in August that same year she was accepted in the NHSC.

"They offered me an opportunity to be debt-free," she said.



John Ehlike | The Flint Journal

A cork board of photos of Nurse Practitioner Kay Southern's children is hung across from her desk in her office at Hamilton Community Health Network in Mt. Morris Thursday afternoon. Southern was pregnant with her first of three children at the age of 19 and has worked from living on welfare to help put her through school at Michigan State University. Southern has worked with the Community Health Network for the past 18 months.

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But more importantly she has been able to give back. She had used community health centers when she and her children were uninsured.

Southern said she can relate to the patients she sees, especially pregnant women. She lived on \$36 a month after her bills were paid, using food stamps and WIC.

She hopes her story can help those women going through the same thing.

"If I can do this, you can totally do this. I just want to motivate them to make good choices for their children," she said. "They are capable of doing anything they put their mind to."

For more information on National Health Service Corps, visit [www.nhsc.hrsa.gov](http://www.nhsc.hrsa.gov).

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