

Story Highlight

Compassion is the Greatest Gift



Flo Spyrow is the former President & CEO at Northern Arizona Healthcare and is currently serving as the Executive Director of the Wellbeing Collaborative.

So there I was, a **nurse** with only **a few months of experience** in an overcrowded, understaffed Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) in Oregon. The NICU that I found myself in spanned several floors and many disconnected rooms overflowing with premature babies. Every night was **all hands-on deck**, emergencies arriving by helicopter, struggling premature babies, and not enough staff. **It was hectic and a lot, but I loved my job.**

However, I kept finding myself going home after long shifts **feeling guilty and frustrated** that I had **not spent enough time** with the anxious **families** of the babies still in critical condition. Despite all the life-saving care and miracles we were a part of, what kept sticking with me were the **faces of the parents** who looked at me hoping I could save their precious babies and not understanding all the technical information I was giving them. Their need for me and our team to deliver a miracle always **left me feeling like I didn't have the time to do my job completely**; to care for their baby **AND** walk with them through the nightmare of a journey they were on. But that's just the way it was.

Thirty-five years later, after a long career as a nurse, attorney, and executive, I never expected to find myself on the other side of that experience. I found myself as a **mother standing at the bedside of my 34-year-old son, Andrew**, pleading with the physicians and nurses **to save my only child**. He was diagnosed with a rare, aggressive form of Glioblastoma. It was **unbelievable** that he could have such a devastating disease; **he was in the prime of his life.**

Although he was cared for in some of the most renown health care systems in this country, it was during this 4-year journey that we experienced **some of the best and some of the worst of healthcare**. Some of the best care we received was from those who **truly cared and made a difference** in the quality and longevity of his life like the neuro-oncologist who fought tirelessly to gain access to a clinical trial for Andrew at Miami Cancer Center even though it was not her job. And those who simply showed us **kindness** along the journey in small and big ways.

On the other spectrum, **the worst care we received was from those who** reflected their work frustrations and hardship on us, like the radiation oncologist who told Andrew that he had 7 months to live, then went right on talking about the treatment fully **ignoring our uncontrollable sobbing**. Or the neuro resident who told me to **"shut up and stand in the corner"** when I was trying to communicate to him about Andrew's care.

These experiences are **WHY** I am now so committed to making a difference in the **systems and environments** in which healthcare workers practice. Because I have experienced how **environments** can have a significant impact on healthcare providers and thus on the patients looking to them for **help, support, and compassion**. That is **WHY** I have found myself as a part of the **Wellbeing Collaborative** and why I believe so strongly in *empowering leaders, professionals, and key stakeholders* to transform healthcare workplaces and systems. We **MUST** retain our health professionals and we **MUST** allow them the time and energy to give the gift of compassion to our patients and their families. In the end, that defines the quality of healthcare we deliver.