

Care Is For Others



By

Kaëlla Stapels

I aspire to join one of the most gratifying trades there is, a job where I take care of people in every aspect of their life and where I make sure they can live in the best way possible. I've chosen a trade, not a calling. I've chosen to help others, but not at my expense. I study in nursing and I work to study since I do not qualify for loans and bursaries and because my parents cannot contribute financially to my studies. Not only do I work to study, but I take on debt to study, given that finding a work-study balance is hard when my school and internship hours keep me from working as much as I should. I never stop. The concept of a weekend no longer exists for me. On weekdays, I go to school, I have my internships. In the evenings, I study, I do my homework, I prepare for my courses and internships. On weekends I work night shifts, day shifts, evening shifts, on rotation and always according to the hospital's needs. After my work shift, I study more, I prepare for my courses more and I start over, endlessly.

In this neverending hustle, I have to find time for my daily tasks like anybody else would, having to clean, do laundry, go out for errands, make lunches, do dishes, deal with my landlord, call my bank and my insurance company, all of that on a budget calculated down to the penny. Things add up during these endless weeks: sleep deprivation, malnutrition and stress. Stress, because my budget is already tight enough when my tuition fees come up, along with my winter electricity bills, the pile of books that will cost me three months worth of rent and my bus fare for the semester. Stress, because I need to decide what I won't be capable of paying this month: Internet, my credit card, my driver's license? My internships represent over 1000 hours of unpaid work and are required for my training. More than 1000 hours where I do not study, but work. I work, yet I am not paid. I can say that I work because I accomplish the same tasks as the nursing staff. I am also legally responsible for my patients and for the care that I give, just the same as any other nurse, given that I am a professional. I am there for over 8 hours a day, and I must remain smiling, comprehensive, efficient, precise, impeccable. I am required to be just as good as the regular staff. And yet, I am not a nurse, I am a student. I am not protected by labour standards. There is no consideration for the fact that I work to go to school, that I live under the poverty line and that I am accumulating a financial as well as a sleep debt which are both growing day by day. I am told that I need to deal with it, that my internship will prepare me, that my working conditions won't be much different than my current conditions as an intern. I am told that lack of sleep on top of psychological and work overloads await me.

During our internships, just like at work, we must arrive 30 minutes ahead of and leave 30 minutes after our shift, which is already 8 hours long, so that continuity of care is assured for our patients. An extra hour every day. Everyone is under pressure. If an error occurs, I am just as responsible as the nurses. I

may be expunged, even if I am just a student. I may be sued, even though I am in training. I am treated like a nurse from a legal standpoint, and I am asked to be a nurse from a professional point of view. I am told to be impeccable, even though I am learning. I do the same tasks as the hospital staff, the vital signs, the hygienic care, the medication, the checkups, educating beneficiaries and much more. I have access to the same insufficient resources, the same dysfunctional spaces where one-patient rooms are transformed into two-patient rooms, where each act of care requires moving an entire set of equipment. An environment where everyone is caught up in the gymnastics of doing more with less. I am subjected to the same conditions, the same cuts that I am told are just the tip of the iceberg. They are trying to force students into a defective mold instead of changing it.

The solution does not reside in more budget cuts to a system which is already choking from having to tighten its belt. I work and I study in fields that are crying out for help, accustomed to seeing their budgets amputated year after year. In these fields, many take it upon themselves to deal with these burdens. We tell ourselves that beneficiaries should not be the ones having to pay, to suffer for these budget cuts, as we suffer blow after blow. As a woman, a student, a worker, a recipient and giver of care, as a citizen, I speak out in opposition to this oppression. I am opposed to this endless austerity. I advocate for the women in every field, for the student parents, for those who take on debt, for those who go back to school for a better future, for those who work two jobs during their studies just to get by.

I am often asked why I carry on, why I'm an activist, why I chose the nursing trade. I have chosen to discuss the issues, the problems, the solutions, to get involved and to go on strike. I have chosen to refuse working for free, to refuse working without better rights and better working conditions. I am doing it to make a difference, be it for the beneficiaries, the students, the workers, the parents, and I believe that by choosing to give wages for interns, we can all make a difference.

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