

The passing of a torch was marked with a pin.

Leigh Westbrook celebrated her graduation from Black Hawk College's Associate Degree Nursing (ADN) Program at a nursing pinning ceremony in December.

Graduates select a special person to pin them, with the event marking the completion of their ADN educations. For Westbrook, that special person was her mom, Brenda Harris, who is a retired nurse.



"For her to be able to pass that torch to me and be proud of me, I can't even describe the wonderful feeling I got from that," Westbrook said. "It was a very special moment."

Harris retired in 2017, and her last day of work happened to be Westbrook's first day back to college. The timing worked out perfectly for Harris to help her daughter as she navigated nursing school.

"She was able to 100% sacrifice her first two years of retirement to help me through," Westbrook said, adding that her mom's help was amazing and crucial to her success.

Path to Black Hawk College

Westbrook realized she wanted to become a nurse her sophomore year at United Township High School. She was working as an evening activity assistant at the nursing home where her mom was a nurse. Seeing the nurses in their element helping others ignited her desire to do the same.

Her path to become a nurse was a winding one. She worked for many years as a certified

nursing assistant and first went to school to pursue her ADN in 2009, a few months after having her first child. She said it was overwhelming at that time, so she decided to pause her education.



Westbrook eventually became a phlebotomist, but still wanted to pursue nursing. In 2017, the timing was just right to return to school and earn her degree. She picked Black Hawk College because of the affordable cost and convenient location. She was happy with her choice.

“Black Hawk College is a great community college that will prepare you for the workforce, or for higher education at a university level,” she said. “I couldn’t have asked for better teachers and advisors to help me navigate through this journey and set me up for a wonderful future.”

For students getting started, Westbrook encourages mastering your time management skills and not being afraid to utilize [resources](#) available to you when you need them. She wasn’t able to work full-time while balancing studying and parenting, and she said getting assistance made a huge difference.

“The college and the community are really good about providing those resources so you can get through school,” she said. “I did have to swallow my pride and tap into my resources.”

What’s next for Westbrook

Westbrook accepted a position at UnityPoint Health in Rock Island in the intensive care unit, where she will begin after taking her National Council Licensure Examination-RN exam.

She decided to work in an ICU because of her time at Black Hawk College. She completed

an ICU clinician rotation during the Fall 2019 semester and knew she was in the right place because she loved the work.

“What I liked about Black Hawk College’s program is all the hands-on experience that we got throughout the entire program,” Westbrook said. “Having that hands-on experience will be essential when we start working as nurses.”



In addition to enjoying critical care, Westbrook also has a passion for community health nursing, so she volunteers with her church’s health unit ministry. Volunteers do blood pressure screenings and preventive education about diabetes and hypertension.

Although Westbrook found the perfect fit for her first RN position, and has an outlet to give back even more, her professional journey isn’t over yet. Eventually, she wants to become a nurse practitioner. For now, though, she is right where she wants to be.

“I love to use my knowledge to empower those who are sick or who cannot help themselves,” she said. “It is an awesome feeling to be able to share our knowledge with our patients and bring understanding and peace to them during a time that is confusing and challenging for them.”

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