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Keiser University will graduate its first class of registered nurses in July

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DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

As millions observed Nurse Recognition Day this month, 12 Tallahassee nursing students were preparing to serve in the nation's largest health-care profession.

In July, these Keiser University students will be the first class to graduate from the school as registered nurses.

Keiser began its three-year nursing program in 2004 - enrolling only a dozen students - after administrators saw a gap that needed to be filled in the medical community. That year, the average age of a nurse in the United States was 47, and 55 percent of nurses planned on retiring between 2011 and 2020.

"I think it's a well-known fact that the nursing shortage is tremendous in the state of Florida," said Dr. Mary Jane Moore, a physician on staff at Keiser. "It's all over the United States, but in Florida it's extreme."

Last year Keiser's program went through the national accreditation process, Moore said. The staff is determined to develop a program that will train nurses for the growing number of openings in the state.

In March the American Association of the Colleges of Nursing reported that the shortage would be between 340,000 and 800,000 by 2020. Florida is expected to have more than 36,000 of those positions on the market.

Moore said the arduous application process took a long time, but, in the end, it was worth it.

"We received five years' accreditation right off the bat," said Moore. "That's almost unheard of in our field."

Patricia Richie, a registered nurse and instructor at the school, said the students do clinicals (hands-on learning) at Westminster Oaks and such hospitals as Tallahassee Memorial, Capital Regional Medical Center and HealthSouth, where they do pediatric, obstetric, psychiatric and surgical rounds.

"And we're growing," she said. "We just got an agreement signed for (a site) in Panama City."

As the population ages, nurses will be needed - even more than they are now - to address the needs of seniors and aging baby boomers.

Alix Jean, the first male to enroll, said he chose Keiser because he had just finished his prerequisites when the school announced its new nursing program. He jumped on the opportunity.

The Tallahassee father of four said nursing will offer him job stability and the chance to work in obstetrics, trauma or cardiac care - all within the same career field. He hopes to work on a cardiac floor in a Tallahassee hospital after completing his final practicum at Tallahassee Memorial.

"There are so many reasons I wanted to go to nursing school," said Jean. "Most are related to opportunity - the opportunity to work in a stimulating profession where every day is different. And, at age 42, learning keeps me young."

Jean is the only man in his class (although a few others have enrolled in the past two years), but he said it keeps things interesting.

"Often I hear, 'OK ladies, now we are going to . . . Oops sorry,' " he said, " 'ladies and gentleman.' "

Depending on the course, students will spend 60 percent or more of their time doing clinicals and working with patients. This serves to acclimate them to the hospital and its staff so they can better choose a specialty.

Because the school doesn't have dormitories, most of the 70 enrolled nursing students live in or around Tallahassee and will likely end up working here.

Nursing student Jewel Scott-Pierre said she hadn't planned to go into nursing, but after working in a doctor's office and for the Department of Health, she was inspired to try her hand at the job.

"I kept thinking, 'I could do that' when I would observe nurses," she said. "As I was finishing my (health-services administration) degree, Keiser was beginning the nursing program."

Scott-Pierre said she is in the classroom twice a week and doing a clinical at HealthSouth twice a week.

"For one entire month, we take the same subject matter, focus on all aspects of it and take a final at the end of that month," said Scott-Pierre. "Then we move on to the next subject."

Over the course of a semester, Scott-Pierre said, her class will have earned the same credits as college students at other schools who take four classes per semester.

Scott-Pierre said she expects that her classmates will thrive after graduation because they receive so much hands-on training and they enjoy small class sizes and because of the high expectations from instructors.

"We're the first class," she said. "We have to be successful."

FIND OUT MORE

For more information on Keiser University's Nursing Program, call 906-9494, go to www.keisercollege.edu/search.htm online or visit the school at 1700 Halstead Blvd., Building 2.
