



Lauren Polzin brings extraordinary dedication and empathy to her role as Burn Center nurse at Torrance Memorial.

SHE'S BEEN THERE

HAVING JOURNEYED FROM BURN CENTER PATIENT TO BURN CENTER NURSE, LAUREN POLZIN BRINGS A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE TO HER PATIENTS.

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Her goal crystallized in a single poignant moment. While undergoing a painful bandage change for burns sustained during a flash fire, Lauren Polzin saw her mother through her hospital room window. Kathy Carreon's reddened face and bent posture revealed the agony she felt watching her daughter suffer. Just then, Torrance Memorial Burn Center nurse Susan Santos swooped over and enveloped Carreon in a hug.

"I know Susan ran to my mom because I saw her hair flying," Polzin recalls. "She wasn't even my nurse that day, but she saw my mom was in distress and instinctively helped. At that moment, I knew I wanted to be the person who comforts others just like Susan did for my mom. I made the decision to become a nurse."

The journey would take time and patience. Polzin suffered burns on more than 40% of her body, including her back, arms, chest, neck and face. She was 27 when the accident happened, while she was working as a PADI Divemaster for a sporting goods store in La Cañada.

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On March 1, 2013, a gas leak and spark caused an explosion that blasted Polzin from a small equipment room onto the pool deck. She army crawled from the deck into the pool and swam 25 meters to call for help on the emergency phone. Polzin was composed enough to tell the cashier at the front desk to call her mother (she knew her husband had his phone turned off) and to instruct panicked employees on what to do.

An Advanced Cardiovascular Life Support ambulance sped Polzin to the nearest Level I Trauma Center, Huntington Health. Hours later, Polzin was transferred to Torrance Memorial Medical Center, one of three burn centers in Los Angeles County.

Specialists in reconstructive, microvascular and complex wound management staff the 12-bed comprehensive Burn Unit. It includes three physicians (Matthew Reiss, MD, Vimal Murthy, MD, and John McKissock, MD), 35 full-time nurses and six part-time nurses, including Certified Burn Registered Nurses and Critical Care Nurses. The unit also treats critical care patients, so staff is cross-trained in cardiac and medical-surgical ICU care.

Polzin spent her first two weeks under sedation to spare her from the pain of dressing changes. She would stay another 2½ months in the hospital, enduring daily dressing changes and wound care, receiving physical and occupational therapy, and seeing a psychologist and pain medication specialist.

After she was discharged from the hospital, Polzin continued her treatment at the Outpatient Burn Clinic. She underwent more than 50 procedures to promote healing, prevent infection and reduce

scarring. These included a large skin graft as well as CO2 fractional laser resurfacing of her face, arms and hands and Q-switch lasering to help remove dark pigment. The treatments lasted about five years.

Getting through such a grueling experience can cause some people to struggle with depression, Polzin says, but that didn't happen in her case. "I had a goal in mind. I knew I wanted to be a nurse, and my short-term goal was to go snowboarding again."

Four years after the accident, Polzin went snowboarding in Big Bear. And she stayed true to her long-term goal, earning her associate's degree and RN license. But before doing that, she wanted to make sure she could work with burn patients without retraumatizing herself.

She volunteered at Torrance Memorial through the Phoenix Society's Survivors Offering Assistance in Recovery program, providing support to others who had experienced burns and their family members. She asked her burn and reconstructive plastic surgeon, Matthew Reiss, MD, who is medical director of the Burn Center, if she could shadow him. He allowed her to be a non-scrubbed observer in the operating room and participate in his clinical rounds.

Polzin applied for Torrance Memorial's New Graduate Nursing Residency, a 12-month, full-time program designed to enhance the skills of newly graduated nurses. She was one of 33 participants chosen from more than 400 applicants. Now she shares her knowledge and experience with burn patients as a nurse who truly understands what they're going through.

"I tell them, 'I know where you've been. I was literally you.' And just as the other nurses do, I walk them through what I'm doing step-by-step. I offer to put on their favorite music or TV. And I ask their favorite swear word. We can shout it together when it gets really bad. Research shows that swearing releases endorphins, which helps reduce pain."

Polzin enjoys wound care, even though it is such a tough part of the process. "I like to craft, and wound care involves cutting things to fit and wrapping things up. I know I can do it quickly and get patients back to being comfortable."

Dr. Reiss says she's a huge asset to the team. "Lauren has insight that none of the rest of us have. She's extraordinarily dedicated to her patients and always gives 110%. I think she's very motivated by her experience and by her empathy for our patients," he says.

Polzin now sports many tattoos on her arms and back, including a beehive, a jellyfish and a lion. "I had no choice and no real control over what happened to me, so tattoos were my way of reclaiming my body," she says.

Two of her tattoos honor important people in her life. One is the phrase "Since you're up," something her mother used to say that became a game between Polzin, her mother and her younger sister. "It's done in her own handwriting and mirrored, so that when I look in the mirror ... it's like she's still talking to me."

Her forearm features a turquoise spool of thread along with Dr. Reiss' signature. "That's my needle and thread because the whole back of my arm and hand, except for my index finger, is a skin graft he sutured on," says Polzin. "I said Dr. Reiss had to sign his work because he stitched me back together." •