Jeanne Wittmann, PTA: Patient, Temperate, Admirable (2011)

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People often ask—particularly my peers—what is worth looking for in a career. We dedicate hundreds of thousands of dollars and our peak years to finding something we can settle down with once those years have passed and we need something comforting and fulfilling to dedicate our time to. Marx argues that the very best occupation one can acquire is the one that helps the greatest amount of people and, alright, that may not always be the most lucrative choice. Marx is not exactly the king of capitalism himself, so that’s to be expected. But in selecting a subject for this paper, my mother, Jeanne Wittmann, dawned on me as a perfect example of passion merging with financial success to make for a truly content worker. She inspires me not because I wish to follow her footsteps to the destination she has found herself, but because her steady, determined march has led her to happiness. That certainly is something I can emulate, even if our professions of choice differ. How does applying heat to the aged and working on their aching appendages, regardless of their mood, sound to you?

To her, it’s ideal. For years, she worked purely as a Physical Therapy Assistant. A day of work for a PTA is full of grunt work, generally “to provide treatment that improves patient mobility, relieves pain, and prevents or lessens physical disabilities of patients” (Physical Therapist Assistants) Today, her passion and expertise for the ins and outs of her occupation has—in spite of never receiving the credentials of a full physical therapist—led her to a position managing an entire nursing home, Hampshire Center in Romney, WV. However, in spite of the new responsibilities entrusted to her, her passion remains with the people she interacts with every day, regardless of the stresses and unpredictability they may inflict upon her. “I like being in administration because it gives me a break. As I’m looking through the numbers, it gives me an opportunity to be by myself. But it’s all about the interaction with people. They are really funny. They are loving and they’re appreciative and yeah, some of them are jerks, but it’s all about your personal contact with people. The psychology of it is really interesting, studying people, watching how they handle their situations” (Wittmann).

Sometimes the situations she refers to can be incredibly depressing. I have been to work with her enough times by now to have seen the unruly patients, the uncooperative staff and the general malaise that can be found there. I have met wonderful people at Hampshire Center, some of them very old and some of them surprisingly young. All of them are sick or hurting to some degree, and the psychology she refers to can be seen in their disposition in response to their injuries. Her job is to get the very best out of these men and women physically, not necessarily to
make friends with them, but it becomes inevitable sometimes, especially when the nursing home “has a family atmosphere, with patients living together for anywhere from eight days to a hundred days. Since it’s a small rural area, some of these people have known each other all these lives” (Wittmann).

She has gone through great pain because of relationships with her patients; whether from old age or illness, having a friend pass on is a fairly common occurrence as a PTA, but she has not let that stop her from keeping on with a friendly, loving, optimistic outlook, one she shows not only to her patients but also in her day-to-day grind. “We have this new woman, she weighs like 280 pounds. We got her to stand up for the first time in so long. Do you know how cool that is? It’s the potential; it’s hope. There’s not one day where something inspiring doesn’t happen here” (Wittmann).

However, as she ran through said grind with me as I listened over the telephone, I’ll admit that I may have stopped believing her sunny disposition was justified. Weaved in my mind were pictures of cold floors and fluorescent lights, ailing patients oozing in all sorts of miscellaneous ways, and binary scribbled on drab pieces of paper, as well as numerous boxes to be checked. In truth, there are a lot of nuts and bolts to her work, but the patients make for a thrilling wild card. She works both hands-on with those patients as well as in administration, making her work densely layered, so bear with me here.

An average day for Mrs. Wittmann starts at 5:50 AM. She takes a shower and feeds her two dogs, Zachary and Flash, who simultaneously attempt to follow her out the door every day at 7 AM in vain. Her drive is roughly 50 minutes each way; work near her home in La Vale, MD is scarce, so the trip through rugged terrain to Romney, WV is a necessary one. I think keeping her ridiculous commute in mind has helped my own from LaPorte to Valparaiso seem far more bearable. Arriving at work at about 8, she gets to work with whomever is up on the caseload for about a half hour, followed by 75 minutes with another patient once she has herself warmed up.

Working with patients typically involves a number of different facets. First off, she has to help them out of bed which is, as in the aforementioned case of the 280 pound woman, not always the easiest thing to do. Sometimes they can be cranky, sometimes they can choose not to do their exercises, and in those instances, it puts greater pressure on the nursing home itself, as they are legally bound to get them those hours. Regardless, it is their right to refuse (Care Plans). If she does manage to stir them, the routine she typically goes through involves walking with patients, teaching them exercises (specifically seating and standing exercises to improve balance, as well as training to improve their gait), home safety tips for their eventual homecoming, and moist heat and ice to lessen swelling. She will use things like fluffy spheres, small weights, cones and other objects to make the whole experience feel more playful for the patient.

Less playful are mounds of paperwork she is required to tackle, which she often does over lunch or peppered wherever throughout the day. Much of this involves balancing the
caseload, which involves determining how much treatment Medicaid allots patients, as well as making sure those hours are filled and completed satisfactorily. Her days are also weekly punctuated by rehab meetings with staff, where issues such as which patients are healthy enough to be discharged from the caseload, which need extra care, where—if they are indeed healthy enough—the discharged patients will live (they are often required to live with their family following a stay at Hampshire Center), what family members to contact, whether or not they will require a follow up home visit, and so on. As you can see, it is the nature of the business to care very deeply about the patient, so Wittmann isn’t alone there, but these meetings really give her a chance to take charge and make sure they get the care they need down the road. Monthly, broader initiatives are made, such as refreshing therapists and nurses on things such as fireworks, as well as discussing the future plans of Genesis HealthCare, the company that owns Hampshire Center, as well as countless other nursing homes on the east coast and mid-Atlantic regions (Locations). These meetings keep up morale and workmanship, but are emphasized to a smaller degree than that of the weekly meetings concerning the patients. The stresses present in an average day of work for Wittmann are varied, but she states “trying to accomplish everything in 8 or 9 hours!” as her greatest struggle, succinctly tying them together.

This routine is something Wittmann has held to for many years without miss; she is nearly always left with months of vacation time that she never uses, and she has weathered plenty of sick days at work instead of home. If a blizzard is inevitable, she’ll sleep on the floor and stay with her staff. She’s 58 years old, and she has worked as a physical therapist for nearly 35 years, but it is abundantly clear that her passion for her work has not waned in the slightest. This passion is essential to keeping up morale on particularly stressful and challenging days, as well as convincing family members of helpless patients that their loved one is in good hands at Hampshire Center. It’s a scary thing to place them in the hands of others, and there’s a certain stigma about nursing homes, especially for older residents; a sense of finality, a winter-of-your-years vibe that I believe they do a terrific job of extinguishing. It’s not just in the large gestures, like actively engaging the residents with crafts, music and visitors, but in the everyday interactions that brighten up the days of people that would be perfectly within their rights to be frustrated and depressed about their situation. About one of the more humorous days she’s spent working at Hampshire Center, Wittmann had this to say:

One of the patients had lost most of her hair. She came down one day wearing a long blonde wig. I took a picture with her in the wig, then I put it on. Then, one other therapist and resident tried on black and pink wigs. Then another nurse, a 6’3”, 250 pound man, came over wearing a short, curly wig. (Wittmann)

All of these moments are documented yearly at a staff meeting that has many of the same objectives as the monthly variations, but with the added bonus of homemade presentations by staff to show off some of the great candid moments of the nursing home. I have helped her make three of these presentations, as she has never really found the time to brush up on computer literacy, and even though it’s a massive time commitment wading through hundreds of pictures
of aging residents wearing humorous hats and playing indoor sports, there’s something acutely inspiring about seeing these people find fulfillment along with physical wellness. It’s what keeps her going every day, and would be as long as she had a job that kept her in touch with others.

It’s probably not a great surprise, then, that her second occupation of choice is marriage and family counseling. She considers a forsaken opportunity to learn the job at California’s Santa Clara University to be one of her greatest regrets. In small ways, she speaks into the lives of her residents spiritually, making it a point to pray with them when particularly ill or hurrying. My father, a preacher who weekly has the opportunity to speak to surprisingly receptive Maryland prisoners, considers her work just as Christian as his own, even if she is working in the realm of the physical. The looks on the faces of her patients, however, denote something far more profound, with a greater lasting impact than the full use of a limb.

This, of course, is not always the easiest job she could have chosen, even in the field as a whole. For several years, she drove a full three hours each day in order to work at a small private practice. Working in a practice of this kind largely keeps you at a leisurely pace, as people specifically pay you to treat them, come in at their appointed time, and hopefully leave in better condition than when they came in. The patients are of a slightly higher class in many cases, and often in better health. The contrast with the long-term care patients she treats today and the outpatients she treated in the late 90s is a sharp one:

Working in long term care takes a different type of person than doing outpatients. I never thought I could do long term care, I never thought I could have the patience. The pressure is less with outpatients…they come in, they want to be there. Most of them can walk, they just want to improve themselves. It’s a more upbeat atmosphere: no encouragement necessary. So much different from long term care. (Wittmann)

Perhaps, in time, Mrs. Wittmann might return to the slower, low pressure environment she has earned for herself, but she is not ready to take it back to first gear, even with the weight of a nursing home on her shoulders. Suffering from acute back pain throughout her childhood due to an undiagnosed tumor, she eventually had it removed in her late teens, and the physical therapy that followed convinced her that their job would be fulfilling, as well as fun for her. I don’t see her work as giddy fun times personally, and my descriptions above give off more of an air of grim hope than thrills-per-minute, but it’s a special taste for the position that, along with the ability to “see the different sides of issues very easily” (Wittmann) is part of what makes her so good at her job. Originally very timid about her talents and notoriously frightened of asserting herself when speaking publically, she took control of our interview and rattled off the ins and outs of her work with the efficiency of a seasoned professional. She also wasn’t afraid to relate to me some of her strengths. “I gain people’s trust without much effort; they put their care in my hands, and that’s very important. As a manager, I’m very fair. I’m growing as a communicator” (Wittmann).
As a mother, she has always done a wonderful job providing for her family, and made it abundantly clear that a college education would be the best thing she could offer me, the pièce de résistance of her time as a parent. When asked what advice she would offer those interested in PTA work, she suggested that they “stay in school as long as possible.” She has degrees in both art and therapy, and has it in mind to someday acquire one in psychology that she can use as her foot in the door to counseling. Her degree in art has never netted her any opportunities in that field, but it does explain why her impressionistic work is so accomplished. My childhood home is filled with her artwork, as well as favorite pieces of other artists that she has acquired over the years. It’s a personal touch on a home that she wishes she could have more time to attend to; she’s quick to repair, paint, caulk or polish—both in case she decides to make a move to sell the house, as well as personal satisfaction—the moment her work affords her time to think about such things. But, I doubt that move will be happening any time soon. She moved us to sleepy Cumberland in 1994 in order to protect me from the slow urban decay of our neighborhood in California, as well as a lucrative private practice position, and now I suspect a little bit of its bucolic atmosphere has inhabited her; she’s found it much easier lately to appreciate where she is and indulge her maternal side in other ways, like cooking. “It’s a great way to give love to other people, and also very relaxing” (Wittmann). It’s the best gift she can give friends and family, and she often gives baked goods—especially her town-famous carrot cake—on holidays, for benefits, or simply whenever someone needs a mood lift.

Wittmann has always searched for work that would give her an opportunity to show her love for people, whether through the aforementioned counseling, or the massage therapy she used to do in the 1980s. Any other professions she’s had, most notably making orthodontic models, would just not cut it for her. She discovered this very early on in her adulthood and tapped into it; I wish I could have such assurance of what it is that I need out of a career. She’s a perfect example of what you can accomplish if you attack your dreams early and with great urgency. Breaking away from her parents far earlier than she would have liked, leaving her in California as they started a new life in Colorado, Wittmann was a starving therapist who eventually found her breaks through the sort of determination and passion for her work that she exhibits today.

I moved away from home last summer, and in that time frame, I could have gotten so caught up in my own activities that I forgot what it is my mother does to provide for me. But I can’t forget. She goes to bed at 9:30 every night, bone tired, and I usually call her right around that time. She listens to my stories, and I know she cares very deeply about the goings-on of my life, but she’s checked out by that point and spent. She could have chosen to be a homemaker, but instead she chose her invest herself in another family, one perhaps older and more ephemeral but no less receptive. I appreciate her thoughts, because I know that when you have something in your life that you love the way she does her job, it’s difficult to divide them up. And when I wake up every morning for school, irritable and haggard, I remember that she’s managed to do her work at earlier hours every day for over three decades and realize that I have it pretty well.
But no one believes they have it as well as Jeanne Wittmann does, even as a patient determines to make her day a challenging one.

Works Cited


Wittmann, Jeanne. Personal interview. 14 March 2011.
