

Sisters graduate *holds hearts* in her hands

By Katy Yoder | Correspondent

Ten years ago, McKenzie Cooper received her diploma from Sisters High School. As soon as she turned her tassel from right to left, she was focused on her dream to be a nurse.

That dream was sparked by her former high school health teacher Heather Johnson, whose curriculum explored various health occupations.

“Ms. Johnson was always encouraging, and such an amazing woman. She told us we could do whatever we wanted, and to go for it,” said Cooper from her home in Eugene.

Cooper did just that.

In her senior year, Cooper was able to set up clinical hours and do rotations through Kevin Cotner’s health class. After spending time with the EMT, she did hours at a sleep lab in Bend, and then shadowed an ICU

nurse at St. Charles Medical Center.

“Those hours at St. Charles were super important. A nurse asked me to set up a ventilator for an intubated patient arriving from the ER. I couldn’t believe she was letting me set it up,” said Cooper.

In hindsight, Cooper knows nothing could go wrong, because the nurse was there to check everything.

“But the fact I could get my hands on equipment that was going to keep someone alive made me think... Wow! I thought doctors did this stuff,” she said.

Cooper soon realized it was nurses who were with the patients all day long.

“I have all respect for doctors but nurses are there 90 percent of the time,” she said. “I remember thinking, I have to do this.”

Another pivotal moment for Cooper came from a sad experience. In 2009, her classmate Stephen Connolly was in the hospital after a tragic accident.



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McKenzie Cooper and her 2-year-old heeler, Artie.



McKenzie Cooper (left) with her nursing colleagues. A passion ignited at Sisters High School has become a career.

“We all spent a lot of time there visiting. As solemn and awful as that was, I saw how amazing the nurses were with so many kids visiting. They were so kind and helpful. I saw the nurses making a huge difference in the experience — at least for us, who were so young, and had no idea what was going on. Nursing was a way to make a huge impact on so many lives in a way that was bigger than just me.”

Cooper knew she needed to attend a school with nursing prerequisites.

“Lane Community College had a good nursing program, so I applied and spent two years there,” she said. “They have a nursing advisor, and you get to see nursing students walking around in their cool little scrubs... and you’re like, that’s going to be me one day... but you have no idea what kind of pain you’re in for!”

To get more experience, Cooper did an internship as a Spanish translator with Volunteers in Medicine in Springfield.

“Speaking Spanish is very helpful in the healthcare industry,” she said. “It’s my dream to go to South America and do nursing down there. I took every Spanish class Lane offered. I’d always seen myself working in a hospital, but that internship made me think, when I get some experience, I could do volunteer work at clinics around the world.”

Cooper filled out applications for nursing school all over Oregon, and was grateful to get into Lane on her first try. Always pushing herself, Cooper wanted more experience, so she started working as an in-home caregiver, and at a memory care facility. It was one of the hardest things she’s ever done.

“Emotionally, it was the most exhausting job I’ve had,” she said. “I have so much respect for people who work in Alzheimer’s care. I was basically doing certified nurse assistant (CNA) work, which taught me a lot about bedside manner and care. There was a lot of on-the-job learning, which was beneficial once I



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