Hocutt, MSN’14, Goes from Fighting for His Life to Helping Save Others’

Ben Hocutt gives new meaning to the term “triple Dukie.”

By the time he finishes clinical rotations in August, he’ll have only one Duke degree under his belt. But one could argue that the former pediatrics patient, current Duke nurse, and soon-to-be MSN degree program graduate has earned an interesting, if not unique, spot among Duke’s most loyal learners and supporters.

Hocutt has spent the majority of his 10 years at Duke working as a critical care nurse and says he couldn’t imagine doing anything else, anywhere else. Even though his first encounter with Duke wasn’t under the best circumstances, his time as a cancer patient at Duke Children’s Hospital and Health Center certainly played a role in steering him toward the career of his dreams.

Back in 1996, at age 12, the Rocky Mount, N.C., native was diagnosed with a rare, soft tissue cancer called leiomyosarcoma. For months, Hocutt had experienced strange symptoms that involved vomiting in the middle of the night while feeling completely normal during the day.

After his pediatrician was unable to pinpoint what was wrong, Hocutt’s mother, a nurse, insisted her son be referred to Duke. Once there, tests revealed a large tumor that had engulfed Hocutt’s gall bladder, liver, pancreas, and stomach. A biopsy further showed that the tumor was malignant.

Even before anyone told him the news, it didn’t take long for young Hocutt to figure out his condition was quite serious. Being left alone in the hospital room with his younger brother while his parents and doctors talked in another room was a telltale sign. Later, hearing the words “tumor” and “cancer” was almost impossible for the middle-schooler to process.

“Two of my grandparents had died of cancer,” Hocutt says. “I had never known anyone to survive it.”

Soft tissue cancers like leiomyosarcoma are often resistant to chemotherapy, and in Hocutt’s case, undergoing radiation could possibly lead to paralysis, so surgery was the only option for him. Fortunately, surgeons were able to successfully remove the tumor during a 10-hour operation.

Although it was a difficult time, Hocutt’s memories of that time center less on his recovery and more on how it impacted his family. “It was a big upheaval in our family life,” he says. “It affected my mom, my dad, and my younger brother spent the entire summer being shuffled around.”

Hocutt says he no longer remembers most of their names, but he also will never forget how his doctors and nurses made him feel. He not only left Duke University Hospital healed, but his time as a patient also reaffirmed his love of science and medicine. A self-described “biology nerd,” Hocutt says he always knew a career in healthcare would be in his future. Only, at the time, he was convinced he’d be a doctor, specifically a surgeon like the one who removed his tumor. Or perhaps an anesthesiologist.

It wasn’t until many years later that his mother suggested nursing to him. Once he enrolled in a nursing program at a Central Carolina Community College in Sanford after high school, he was forever hooked on nursing. By the time he got his first job in critical care, he knew he’d truly found his calling.
“I like the interaction I get to have with patients when they’re at their most critical state,” Hocutt explains. “It takes a lot of skill and specialized knowledge to be a critical care nurse. Not everyone can do it, but I can’t imagine being in any other part of the hospital.”

Hocutt also holds a BSN degree from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. But in recent years, his desire to work at his fullest potential as a nurse led him to pursue an MSN degree from Duke University School of Nursing’s Acute Care Pediatric Nurse Practitioner program.

His advanced degree will certainly help him be a better nurse, but Hocutt also recognizes that his time at Duke Children’s nearly 20 years ago gave him a few lessons that no nursing school can teach.

“It definitely has given me perspective,” he says. For example, he says he knows what it’s like to first wake up on a ventilator right after surgery. “I remember having that feeling of waking up and not knowing where you are and not being able to see your family. That perspective helps when talking to the patient and helping them calm down.”

Such perspective also came in handy for Hocutt when he volunteered a few years ago as a camp counselor at Camp Kaleidoscope. A residential camp for children treated at Duke Children’s. A Camp Kaleidoscope alum himself, Hocutt was able ease the fears of a group of campers who were nervous about swimming without shirts.

“I took my shirt off, and showed them that my stomach is riddled with scars. They thought it was great having a counselor who could identify with them.”

— BERNADETTE GILLIS

Lester G. Manalo, BSN’10, completed the family nurse practitioner MSN degree program at Yale University in May 2014. He and his wife Angela welcomed their first child, Philip, last February. They currently live in the Washington, D.C., area.

Sarah Simons, BSN’10, is at Vanderbilt University getting a master’s degree in acute care nursing with an intensivist specialty. Prior to this, she worked three years as a cardiac ICU nurse at UNC Hospitals. She lives in Nashville.

Fowler Richards Smith, BSN’10, recently started a new position as a pre-transplant coordinator with the Abdominal Organ Transplant Program at Wake Forest Baptist Health, after working in the emergency department there for two years. After receiving her trauma nursing core course (TNCC) certification and becoming a code blue nurse coordinator, she now plans to work toward becoming a certified clinical transplant coordinator. Smith lives in Winston-Salem, N.C.

Preston Taylor, MSN’10, is a practicing CRNA with Austin Anesthesiology Group in Austin, Texas. She enjoys any outdoor exercise and completed her first marathon last year. She recently got married.

Lauren Chilton Wiseman, MSN’10, is working for a regional health information exchange as a clinical project manager in Normal, Ill. She achieved American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) certification in 2012 and recently ran for and won a position on the Greater Chicago chapter of the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS) board. Her son Michael is a freshman at Illinois State University. Her daughter Katie graduated from Eureka College in 2012.

Rebecca Bogenrief, BSN’11, is a certified clinical transplant nurse working on a transplant floor at UT Southwestern St. Paul Hospital in Dallas, Texas. She takes care of kidney and liver transplant patients before and after transplantation. She has a second job at a pediatric dental surgery center, where she takes care of children recovering from anesthesia.

Josephine Malfitano, PMC’11, DNP’12, continues to work as a performance improvement and accreditation manager and as a family nurse practitioner at Onslow Memorial Hospital in Jacksonville, N.C. In December 2013, she had a manuscript published in the Journal of Neuroscience Nursing. Her husband Timothy will retire this year as deputy police chief of Jacksonville. Last year, he received the Order of the Long Leaf Pine Award in law enforcement. The couple has four children.

Clint Owens, MSN’11, started the PhD program in nursing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the summer of 2013.

Alyse Strahm, DNP’11, works as a neonatal nurse practitioner at Sparrow Health System in Lansing, Mich., and Covenant HealthCare in Saginaw, Mich. She is co-author of the article, “Optimizing Protein Intake in Premature Infants: A Neonatal Quality Improvement Project,” which was published in Advances in Neonatal Care in December 2013. She has two grandchildren, Lola and Jacob.

Marie Clarke Madden, BSN’12, is moving back to North Carolina from Florida to work at the Cardiothoracic Intensive Care Unit at Duke. She enjoys spending time