Dr. Pam Avila, “Always on Duty”

Passion for Nursing and teaching

Dr. Pam Avila who teaches the Porterville High School Academy of Health Sciences grew up in Porterville and was a member of the first graduating class at Monache High School in 1971. She’s third generation in the community, and her grandmother and grandfather settled in Terra Bella, but they were originally from Illinois and Oklahoma.

Avila said she was 5 years old when she knew she wanted to be a nurse, because there was a nurse in Terra Bella, Lorraine Stevens, “who impressed me, and I wanted to be just like her.

"She is 90 plus, and still lives in Terra Bella, in the same house."

In 1967, Avila said everyone wanted to go to PHS, but she lived within the boundaries of the new high school, Monache.

"Then we became more and more proud, picking the school colors, and taking ownership. We named the teams. Then we had Buck Shaffer for two years in band, and Dr. Dean Simple for two years of choir,” said Avila.

"Then we had Dale Andersson for band, and Mr. Rasmussen for choir. And we were the first band to go to Selma Band Review. No one had seen Anderson’s marching style then, and we won a trophy."

In high school, as a sophomore, Avila wanted to go pick apples with friends and thought it would be fun, during the summer.

“When I asked my Dad, Loyd Turner, he said, 'Absolutely not. You want a job, go to school.’”

Avila said her father worked in the fields and wanted something better for her daughter.

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She explained she found a little program in Lindsay, in 1968, which was started by two nurses Mrs. Wallman and Mrs. Ruth Sutton. It was a precursor to the Tulare County Office of Education (TCOE ROP CNA) Program, or Regional Occupational Program for Certified Nurse Assistants.

Avila traveled to Lindsay on Tuesdays and Thursdays afterschool for her medical classroom studies, and spent all day Saturday at the hospital in Lindsay to receive hands-on training with patients.

She received a certificate and got a job after studying for one semester. Her first job was working for Mrs. Stevens afterschool, looking after her father in the late 1960s.

Then she worked at the old Hacienda on Putnam, a skilled nursing facility, when she was 16 or 17.

Dr. Avila graduated at the end of her junior year in 1970, because she had been accepted to the prestigious Samuel Merritt School of Nursing in Oakland. “But, she says with a laugh, before I left for college, I met a sailor, Michael Avila, and I fell in love, and went to the Licensed Registered Nursing (LVN) program at Porterville College,” she said.

"Mike went to Vietnam while I was in college for the first and second semesters. Then I went back and walked with my MHS class in their graduation ceremony in June 1971, and Mike and I got married in August."

"Then he went back to Vietnam for a second tour of duty, and I was pregnant by then."

She experienced the most severe morning sickness and had to drop out of the LVN program, Avila explained, because the nursing interns had to travel all around the valley for classes: Tulare, Visalia, Porterville Developmental Center, Sierra View Hospital, and even Delano.

Avila said there is so much old nursing history in Tulare County, and she was lucky enough to learn from some of the very best old school nurses.

“I was fortunate to learn from them. We learned how to mix our drugs, how to pass medicines from stock bottles to patients, and we learned to wait until we got our lab work back to give insulin to diabetic patients.

“People came to the hospital the night before a surgery and we provided them with education, evening back rubs to help them get to sleep properly, that was called PM care.

“There was different care for AM care. Everyone got a warm washcloth, a tooth brush, and sat up to be ready for breakfast.

“As a Licensed Registered Nurse (LVN), the biggest part of my duties at Sierra View was to be responsible for the medication pass for 40 patients. And I was with the first class of LVN’S to be IV certified.

“All the LVN’S would help the RN’S with IV’S and with blood transfusions.

”After her first year at Sierra View she went to work in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) where she and a RN cared for seven patients.

Avila said she also helped cover the emergency room, or labor and delivery rooms.

“Whatever was needed. We did whatever had to be done and we helped each other.”

She worked at SVDH for 10 years and had a great mentor, Ruth Smallwood, who took her to all the nursing conferences she attended, and encouraged Avila to finish her RN schooling.

“I remember a conference on therapeutic touch which was relatively new in medicine then, and I also attended a class on death and dying with Elizabeth Kubler Ross.”

After that, Avila said she went to work with Dr. Ashok Behl in 1983. She worked with him as an LVN, an RN, and then as his nurse practitioner for 30 years.

“He came to Porterville in 1982, and we met and worked together in the ICU. He asked me to come work for him and the rest is history. And I just love him.”

Avila worked at Porterville College, at Kern Hospice, which is now Optimal Hospice in the area, then SVDH, and then at PC briefly, while she was getting her BSN and her Certificate in Public Health.

“I really love nursing,” she said, “and I tell my students “When you find your passion, you will never work a day in your life.”

Dr. Avila’s first MSN Nursing thesis in 2002 was “Bringing collegiate level education to rural communities.” She continued working on her master’s and finally her doctorate in the following years.

And in 2008/2009 was her first class from Porterville High School Academy of Health Sciences.

There were 125 students in the academy at that time, approximately, but now there are around 400 in 2020.
In 2010, Pam and Mike Avila’s daughter passed away, and later in that year, Pam had a stroke. That’s what got her into teaching full time.

After she retired from Dr. Behl’s office, Steve Graybehl, principal at PHS, offered her a full time job.

“One of my students, who graduated in 2010, is now a respiratory therapist and another is a Licensed Vocational Nurse (LVN),” Avila said. “And the other is currently working on her masters degree in Health Care Administration (IT) focus.”

In a January, 2020 interview, Dr. Avila said, “Over the past three to four years, I’ve primarily taught juniors and seniors, but previously taught all grade levels.

“I absolutely love teaching the students.”

“Once you have Mrs. Avila, you’re stuck with me for life,” she said with a big smile. “The reason I really like teaching high school students is they want to know and they are interested in what they want to know about their interests.

“Most of the students want to be pediatricians or nurses, because that is what they’ve experienced, so when they come to the academy they learn about all the different kinds of doctors that we have, ancillary services, x-ray technicians, dieticians, stenographers for echocardiograms, and more. “Then there are the different types of nurses; ER nurse, OB nurse, surgical nurses, nurse practitioners; with an M.A. in family practice.

“The students look at emergency medicine, EMT’S, paramedics and firefighters.

All of these careers are available at our academy.”

Avila said it’s fun to watch the “light go on” when students find their passion. “Then nothing will stand in the way of achieving their goals.”

The PHS program is nationally distinguished through the National Academy Foundation and the program is also a California Partnership Academy.

“The students leave with several certifications — one is a CNA, so they can go to work and support themselves,” Avila said. “At the academy we also offer college and college transferable courses. That saves the students money.

“The PAHS program is very rigorous. So when students go to college they are already prepared for college. That’s our goal.

“The students also do a lot of community service and our signature is ‘hands only CPR,’ by the American Heart Association, because we know it saves lives.”

The academy works closely with SVMC and Imperial Ambulance Service, Chief Dave Lapere and the Porterville Fire Department, as well as a full academy board, that was put together by Dr. Myron Lord, a retired OB GYN, who was instrumental in putting together the academy with Dr. Avila.

“We are the only pathways that provides scholarships, and Lord started that,” she said, “and PAHS is continually growing and changing, and currently there are 400 students, when initially there were 100 to 125, in 2008/2009.”

Avila said the academy had its first student accepted to Rice University on a full-ride scholarship.

The students Avila spoke about are English Language Learners.

The hospital and medical community has supported the academy

Dr. Avila said, “PAHS students are placed in doctor’s offices, pharmacies, Sierra View District Hospital, Imperial Ambulance, the fire department, and do volunteer and internship work.

“I encourage all my students to do their community service. And this would not be possible without great teachers and supportive administration, or the PUSD district office.”

Avila added the program has produced the youngest paramedic licensed in the state, who works for the Visalia Fire Department.

Yessenia Ramos Silva, an award winning student from PUSD, said about Dr. Avila, “I am not surprised that Dr Avila has been nominated as the Hometown Hero. She is a heartwarming individual who puts everyone before her. As her former student, I can attest to her commitment to students in providing support and care physically, mentally, and spiritually. She has demonstrated outstanding empathy, leadership, and determination as she worked towards obtaining her doctoral degree to teach her students that it is never too late to achieve your goals. Dr. Avila sets an amazing example for the world to live by.”

“I have known Dr. Avila for almost four years since I was a freshman,” said Julieta Munoz, “and I have been in a few of her courses, including Nursing P-100 and EMT. She is an amazing mentor because she is passionate about helping her students. Dr. Avila is someone I can laugh with, but also have serious conversations.”

PHS Assistant Principal Salma Aziz, said, “Pam has a heart of gold. She loves helping people, and she is passionate about teaching. The opportunities that she has created in PAHS have changed the lives of many of our students. She has helped mold the future medical professionals in our community by teaching them empathy, kindness, and compassion. She lives by the PAHS’S motto ‘Always on Duty,’ by being available for the students as they intern at various medical facilities and engage in community service opportunities.”

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