



## Blood brothers: Volunteers lend an arm to med students

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Marissa Arena, a medical assistant student at YTI Career Institute, feels for veins in the arm of volunteer Matthew Johnson. Practicing on a real person helps students develop communication skills and work with people who might react differently to the experience. *(Rebecca Hanlon)*

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"I remind myself that the reward outweighs the fear, and it's never as bad as I think it will be." - Jen Ayers

Matthew Johnson took a deep breath as **YTI Career Institute** student Marissa Arena tightened the rubber band around his bicep.

"You're good at this, right?" he asked, chuckling as Arena leaned in and rubbed her finger over his arm to check for veins.

Johnson, a computer systems specialist student, was one of several volunteers who helped about 12 medical assistant students complete a graduation requirement: 43 successful needle sticks on a live person.

While the thought of getting pricked by an amateur would send some running, YTI Career Institute and other Central Pennsylvania medical programs rely on volunteers to help give students the experience that doesn't come with reading textbooks or practicing on dummies.

"Volunteers are helping students who will someday do this for a living," said Qiana Moultrely, an licensed practical nurse and medical assistant instructor at YTI. "They won't be successful in the real world if they don't go through this part first."

A successful needle stick requires filling a full tube of blood, or a fat drop from a finger tip prick, Moultrely said. Before the students can pass the program, they must collect blood using different types of needles and equipment that accompanies the needles.

Even a seasoned phlebotomist won't be successful every time, Moultrely said, so it's normal for students to miss during their practice period.

Before students are released on the volunteers, they practice with fake arms, where artificial blood is pumped through a series of veins to give a realistic feeling without the distractions that come with practicing on a real person.

But once students master the fake arm, it's time to move on to the real thing. A real arm is attached to a person who requires the student explain what they'll do first, who sometimes expresses pain and in some situations might even be at risk for fainting.

In addition to other students and faculty who volunteer, friends and family older than 18 can sign a consent form and volunteer their own supple veins for the good of science.

Each volunteer who rolls up a sleeve is paid with a ticket that allows them to stop by the student lounge and fill a plate with food made by the medical assistant students.

"The bribe usually works," Moultrely said.

Kelsey Stayrook, a sixth- and final-term medical assistant student, said she gets the most nervous practicing on volunteers because she doesn't want to hurt them. About an hour into the practice recently and half of her attempts were successful, she said.

"I know it's what I have to do if I want to succeed in this field," Stayrook said. "I just hope my hands stop sweating."

Jen Ayers, who volunteered during the practice, said she had a fear of needles that often would leave her feeling faint. Even though she has overcome her fear over the years, she still gets nervous right as the needle appears, she said.

"I remind myself that the reward outweighs the fear, and it's never as bad as I think it will be," Ayers said.

### **Paid actors in the classroom**

The use of real people in simulated medical situations has been so beneficial in the classroom that the **Pennsylvania College of Health Science** in Lancaster County is expanding to include paid actors, said Joe Corvino, director of simulation learning.

The sonography program, where ultrasounds are performed, has used the most volunteers, he said. The school advertises the need for pregnant volunteers to come in and help students practice giving ultrasounds on real patients.

"It not only gives them time to practice on a person, but they can improve their communication skills, look at live pictures of the baby and learn how to walk the volunteer through the process," Corvino said.

Internal volunteers who were mostly faculty or other staff members also have helped act out certain situations, but the school has decided to invest in an official standardized patient program to pay actors.

Corvino said the program is still in the development stages, but he hopes that within a year the school can work with other schools that feature theater programs. Theater students would be trained on how to behave as mental patients or if a student must practice to deliver bad news.

"Those discussions never become a comfortable situation," Corvino said. "We want to be able to expose them to that."

Getting volunteers has been tough for some programs, and takes people away from other things they could be doing, he said. Developing a program that intentionally looks at working with members of the community is a great way to build partnerships, he said.

"We see it as a way of extending our hand out to people who want to a help," Corvino said. "These are students who will soon be professionals working at your doctor's office, and I think this is the best way to prepare them for how they can best serve those patients."

