

Nursing Apprenticeship Fulfilled a Calling



PARTNERSHIP TO ADVANCE YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP



For as long as she can remember, Abby Penninger wanted to be a geriatric nurse. Her grandmother was a big part of her life growing up, as were her grandmother's friends. She has an affinity for senior citizens, so at 16 she began working in the kitchen of [St. John's United](#), a senior living facility in her hometown of Billings, Montana. She balanced this role while also obtaining her Certified Nursing Assistant certification.

However, when Penninger heard about a nursing apprenticeship at St. John's, she had to be convinced by her current mentor, Administrative Director Kailee Noyes, to apply.

Penninger is thrilled that she listened to Noyes, as her apprenticeship has set her on a path to a career as a geriatric nurse. With financial support from St. Johns, she has completed two years at Montana State University and is now working toward a B.S. in nursing by fulfilling her clinical requirement at St. John's.

"An apprenticeship really puts you in the position to know [what career] you want to do and if you're passionate about it," Penninger said. "It's worth it; 10 out of 10. I'm so thankful for it because a lot of my friends in college aren't sure what they want to do with their lives, so I'm thankful I found my calling early on."

The apprenticeship at St. John's was facilitated by [Reach Higher Montana](#), which works with businesses and organizations throughout the state to develop apprenticeship programs for high school students. It is also registered with Montana Registered Apprenticeship.

A youth apprenticeship is a work-based learning program designed to start when apprentices are high-school age.

A proven education and workforce strategy, youth apprenticeship combines paid, structured on-the-job training with related classroom learning. Youth apprenticeship builds a more inclusive economy by creating affordable, reliable, and equitable pathways from high school to good jobs and college degrees.

Youth apprenticeship also creates a talent pipeline for industries that participate, enabling them to train young people who can hit the ground running when they begin working full-time.

Reach Higher Montana works with the [Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship \(PAYA\)](#), a multi-year, collaborative initiative that supports states and cities in their efforts to expand access to high-quality apprenticeship opportunities for high-school-age youth. PAYA believes that youth apprenticeship has the power to transform how our education system prepares young people for careers and adulthood, as it connects the learning needs of youth with the talent needs of industry, creating a more inclusive economy and skilled workforce.

Noyes believes that in an era when qualified and caring staff are hard to find, youth apprenticeship will help St. John's build a sustainable talent pipeline.

“Our mission is to provide nurturing environments of hope, dignity, and love to our residents. So when we see staff that are following that mission, it's amazing to see that growth in them and help them succeed to meet their goals,” Noyes said. **“So hopefully once Abby finishes nursing school, she'll want to stay on and be a nurse with us.”**

In turn, Noyes strongly believes in identifying and cultivating future staff. "It doesn't take long to tell which ones are actually interested in learning and wanting to progress. In high school, they are young, but they are also developing and there's always room for growth," she said.

Mentorship is a key element of youth apprenticeship, giving students a trusted adult to guide their professional growth and answer questions. Penninger said she is grateful for Noyes' mentorship, beginning with the encouragement to apply to the program.

“ In the healthcare field, sometimes it's hard to see your goal. You kind of lose the light at the end of the tunnel because it can be so stressful. With the apprenticeship, I have constant support, which has been amazing,” Penninger said.

And mentors and supervisors of apprentices learn how to best manage high school students, such as showing respect for their ideas and texting rather than calling. "I think everyone probably remembers their first job," Noyes said. "At St. John's, we try to make it a positive experience and a good learning opportunity that we can all look back on and be grateful for. "

Youth apprenticeship also helps develop general professional skills that will serve students well no matter their career, and links high school courses to professional growth. Penninger said she learned to always ask questions of her co-workers, which made her better at her job and, in turn, earned their trust.

"You have to learn communication skills," she said, adding that she now understands the connections between her high school studies and career advancement. "You're never going

to stop communicating—no matter what profession, you're going to send emails, you're going to have to write papers. So you need English classes. It's all worth it because it's just building your knowledge."

Penninger said the application process for her apprenticeship was extensive, requiring four essays and a group interview by eight people. But she understands that St. John's was entrusting her with a great deal of responsibility for its residents.

"If a person falls, they can be severely hurt. It's a lot of trust that's been given to you. As a young person, that can be scary. But it's also hard for others to give that trust, so you have to earn it," Penninger said. Adding that she learned skills that have been invaluable as a nursing student such as bed changes, looking out for residents who have difficulty swallowing, and repositioning supportive gear to help residents sit, stand and walk.

Noyes said that youth apprenticeship also teaches young people the responsibility of having a job where others are depending on them.

"They're responsible for showing up, being present and caring for these people. If they don't do that well, they're hurting the residents, who rely on them," Noyes said. "I think it goes beyond just the workplace. I think it's a good life lesson."

To learn more about Reach Higher Montana, visit <https://www.reachhighermontana.org>

