

A Santa Rosa man finds his career path

Nate Smith didn't have a career in mind when he was a senior at Piner High School in 2005, but he knew he wanted to avoid onerous student loan debt.

He wanted to attend The University of California at Davis, but the tuition was \$27,000.

"I decided not to attend right away," he said.

His mother had a friend in the administration at Satellite Healthcare in Santa Rosa, a not-for-profit provider of dialysis treatment for chronic kidney disease patients, and Smith was hired as a technician's aide in October 2006. The position required a high school diploma.

He worked for a week at Satellite Healthcare's Windsor facility where he met Devorah Ritchie, a charge nurse who became his mentor. It was the beginning of Smith's nursing career.

In 2007, after five months of training in Santa Rosa, he became certified as a hemodialysis technician and went back to the Windsor facility.

"As a tech aide, I helped by being the eyes and ears of the charge nurse," Smith said. The job entailed setting up and monitoring dialysis machines.

"The nurses and patients were constantly encouraging me to go back to school," Smith said. "I always had that in mind, and now my interest was in nursing."

Smith, now 27, took advantage of Satellite Healthcare's professional development program, which reimburses employees for education expenses. Full-time employees are eligible for reimbursement up to \$5,000 per calendar year. The maximum benefit for a degree or certification program is \$20,000 for full-time employees and is pro-rated for part-timers.

The company was created in 1973 and also has dialysis locations in Illinois, Tennessee and Texas.

Smith enrolled in Santa Rosa Junior College pre-nursing courses in 2010, and earned an associate degree in nursing. He transferred to Sonoma State University as a junior in 2013.

"I had chemistry, anatomy, physiology, micro-biology, biology and statistics classes while I was working three 12-hour shifts a week at Satellite Healthcare," he said.

In July 2015, he received his Bachelor of Science and Nursing degree at SSU. Satellite Healthcare is reimbursing him \$17,000 for his college expenses.

"Nate was like our baby. It was a team effort and a good example of a company supporting education, empowering employees and investing in the community," Ritchie said.

Smith was so impressed with Satellite Healthcare's reimbursement program he wrote a letter to the company's CEO, Rick Barnett, at the corporate office in San Jose.

"I said I wanted him to recognize the people who supported me and the concern and love they had for me," he said.

About 30 employees participated in the reimbursement program last year, Ritchie said.

Smith said he did get a loan to begin his education but was able to repay it with Satellite Healthcare's help and his part-time employment at the Windsor facility. He is now a staff nurse at Satellite Healthcare in Windsor, and he and his spouse own a home in Santa Rosa.

"I didn't graduate with zero debt but with significantly less debt," he said.

