



Maryland STEPs Up for Working Parents

TRAINING GOOD WORKERS FOR NEW
OPPORTUNITIES AND HELPING EMPLOYERS
FILL CRITICAL JOBS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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STEP Pilot Program

O V E R V I E W

Tracy Smith has worked since she was 11. But at 27, Smith's income as a hospital security supervisor was barely enough to support car payments and a 3-year-old daughter who loves to sing and wanted a Dora the Explorer doll for Christmas.

"Things were very tight," says Smith, a Baltimore City single mother. "The rent was late. The car payment was late. Everything was late. At the end of the month, there was nothing left."

Helping workers like Smith — able yet underemployed — is the goal of The Skills-Based Training for Employment Promotion (STEP) pilot program. The \$2 million Maryland-financed program aims to train incumbent workers to advance into jobs with benefits that can sustain a family, and to ease the state's critical manpower shortages in health care, technology and transportation sectors.

"It's a great opportunity," says Smith, who participated in a STEP-financed course for medical coders and is working in Sinai Hospital's medical records department for about \$13 an hour. "Once you get experience, there's money to be made in medical coding."

STEP splits training costs with employers, so workers can move into better jobs within the company. The program also helps individual workers in dead-end jobs crystallize career goals, obtain training and search for better jobs outside their company. During training, the program also provides "wraparound" services to help Maryland students overcome the real life obstacles, such as sick kids and limited bus routes, that so often and easily derail attempts to gain extra skills. At the end of training, Baltimore participants have seen an average \$5,777 boost in annual income; Montgomery County participants have seen an average \$2,348 increase.

STEP, funded through the Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation, "benefits employers, employees and their families," says Eleanor Carey, President of the Governor's Workforce Investment Board, which was charged by the Maryland legislature to develop and administer the STEP model. "It's a win-win-win situation."

STEP PILOT PROGRAM OVERVIEW

STEP was born in 1999 from the frustration Maryland Senator Barbara A. Hoffman shared with low-wage entry-level workers. These workers, already stretched between work and family demands, couldn't afford the time or money to obtain the skills needed to permanently escape poverty's web. Hoping to help Maryland's working poor, Hoffman envisioned a state-funded program that teamed with employers to provide skills-based training for jobs with substantial vacancy rates.

The legislature authorized the project in 2001, and the Governor's Workforce Investment Board set up a review process that ultimately awarded a \$575,000 grant to the Baltimore City Mayor's Office of Employment Development, a \$415,000 grant to the Montgomery County Workforce Development Corporation, and a \$10,000 planning grant to Prince George's County Workforce Services Corporation.

Baltimore participants have seen an average \$5,777 boost in annual income; Montgomery County participants have seen an average \$2,348 increase.

The program recently received another year of funding. STEP TWO has granted \$437,013 to Baltimore City, \$100,000 to Southern Maryland Works, and \$459,000 to Prince George's Workforce Services Corporation. All three programs will focus on training workers for allied health and nursing jobs, which have been identified by the board as job shortage areas.

Hugh Bailey, program manager for the division of Workforce Investment Services for Montgomery County, says STEP is a "unique" approach to workforce development that helps break the cycle of poverty for many families. "People are more proud of the work they do and are instilling a certain work ethic in their children and family," he says. "They see that Mommy's got a promotion. She's a role model."

Currently, STEP is training about 250 workers at Baltimore City and Montgomery County sites. Trainees already are employed by the University of Maryland Medical Center, the Johns Hopkins Health System, Mercy Medical Center, Sinai Life Bridge, Montgomery General Hospital, Holy Cross Hospital, Barwood Transportation Inc., Comcast Cable and CVS Pharmacy. These employers pay half of training costs with contributions of cash and in-kind services.

STEP... "helps break the cycle of poverty for many families."

"STEP requires significant financial and institutional support from employers," says Karen Sitnick, director of the Mayor's Office of Employment Development. "The employer must agree to allow a person to train and reap his salary, and to backfill that position with some other employees. I believe this kind of initiative won't work if employers don't have that level of commitment."

Another part of the program is STEP's individual services, administrated through Individual STEP Accounts. This part supports Maryland workers (some of whom are recently unemployed) as they train for better jobs in a wide variety of fields. Montgomery County STEP, for instance, supported 10 trainees through a Howard University bookkeeping and accounting program, and it sent a would-be trucker to driving school for his commercial driver's license.

"STEP's individual accounts help us fund a diversity of training that we typically don't see," says Michael D'Ovidio, operations manager for the Career Transition Center in Montgomery County. "It acquaints us with new vendors and expands the resources our counselors are exposed to."

S T E P P I L O T P R O G R A M O V E R V I E W

Another STEP benefit is that it fosters a team spirit among trainees who help and support each other. “Doing something hard as part of a group helps each individual,” says D’Ovidio. “People build relationships and network. It helps improve retention and increases motivation.”

The current STEP grant, which ends in June 2003, primarily trains workers to become:

- Medical coders, who decipher physician codes for billing and administrative purposes;
- Surgical technicians, who prepare operating rooms for surgery;
- Nursing extenders, who assist registered nurses;
- Pharmacy technicians, who assist pharmacists;
- Transportation customer service representatives;
- Communications service technicians.

People chosen for STEP training must:

- Work at least 20 hours per week or be recently unemployed;
- Have dependent children;
- Live in a household with an income that is not more than 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

“Folks who come into this program are working poor who may make \$7 or \$8 an hour in house-keeping or grounds keeping,” says Dawn Martin, STEP program coordinator for the Baltimore City site. “After training, some will double their income. That’s a wonderful outcome for six months investment of time.”

STEP business participants:

- Foot half the bill for training;
- Work with training providers to help set curriculum;
- Guarantee successful trainees a job with benefits upon completion.

In return, employers fill positions that sometimes go begging for months and “grow” workers with greater company loyalty. “STEP gives hospitals a way to identify, assist and reward long-term employees with good, solid work records,” says Catherine Crowley, vice president of the Maryland Hospital Association. “These people are rooted in the community. They have an affiliation with the hospital that is well established. It’s a win-win on both sides. You’ve got a good worker to start with, and you know you’ll have a good worker at the end of the process.”

John Ashworth is chief operating officer of the University of Maryland Medical Center, which is supporting — and in some cases paying overtime to back up — employees participating in STEP training. “Our chokepoint in the future is going to be the constricted labor market,” says Ashworth, describing his decision to participate in the program. “As we considered where and how we were going to attract employees — especially in technical categories — the STEP program became very attractive. “It gets to be expensive,” he continues, “especially when we have to back up employees while in classes. But there is an investment payoff in the future. We’ve created a stable workforce, somebody who is loyal to the organization because we grew him. We’re also contributing to our community. It’s a great formula.”

Karen Sitnick believes that formula can be replicated around the country. “We’ve developed a blueprint for using this approach with other industries that have growth potential regionally and nationally,” Sitnick says. “We hope this will be a model for the country.”

STEP Employers: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“We are always interested in exploring innovative ways to give employees interested in advancement an opportunity to grow. We were excited about STEP because it encourages advancement by giving people already working a chance to pursue courses that will enhance skills during work hours. Training doesn't come out of their pocketbooks or cut into their free time.

Plus, we were attracted to the combination of the state and employer cooperating to make it work. We've dabbled in offering training in the past, particularly in the medical coding field. But when you have the opportunity to get a state grant that can split the cost of the curriculum, it really makes sense for the employer to participate.

If you're a hard working, full-time employee at the lower end of the economic pole, it's not easy to pick up, on your own, additional courses or skills needed to advance. The key to STEP is that it offers an employee an opportunity to advance at no cost to him. The employer is encouraging his move up, carving out time.

We gave trainees from our housekeeping and nurses assistant staffs an average of 16 hours a week to attend classes on our nickel. Of course, that meant we had to backfill their positions, and in some cases that meant we incurred overtime costs for others to do their work.



RON PETERSON

But it really is a good investment for us. STEP is offering training in job categories that have been difficult for us to fill — medical coders, pharmacy techs and surgical techs. We have had significant vacancies in those categories; an opening can go begging for many months. Sometimes, we fail to fill it. If you run for a long time with major vacancies in these areas, you tend to incur premium costs to get the work done — overtime costs or purchasing the service through an agency, which can be quite expensive. In some cases, the work does not get done adequately.

So, it's a good investment to give our folks the opportunity to gather these additional skills. Furthermore, it reinforces a sense of loyalty in our employees. They realize we thought enough of them to invest in them. That's another good thing. STEP makes good business sense for us. It means more money for our employees and their families. And it helps our community grow, because skill enhancement is key if we're going to help more and more people out of their employment ruts. We can't just help people land entry-level jobs and assume that the rest of their career movement will take care of itself. It's important to help these people advance. ”

EMPLOYER BENEFIT:

Encourages advancement

– RON PETERSON, PRESIDENT OF THE JOHNS HOPKINS HEALTH SYSTEM
AND JOHNS HOPKINS HOSPITAL, BALTIMORE, MD.

“**M**y medical coding department converts physical diagnoses or procedural statements into a coded number that can be used by a computer for administrative tasks, billing and hospital research. We code almost 100,000 patients a year. Yet, not many people know about this kind of work, and we don’t get many applicants; or the ones we get frequently are not qualified.

But it’s a wonderful job. You’re working in a hospital, a long established organization that does community good. And the pay is very good and can climb from \$18 to \$25 an hour. And there is such a shortage. If you are a qualified applicant, most coding managers will give you whatever shift you want.

EMPLOYER BENEFIT:

Effective recruiting tool

Before we sent trainees to the STEP program, we were two coders short, and I wondered where we were going to get qualified applicants. We covered the work with temps, which are terribly expensive, and overtime. But at times, I felt hopeless.

Then I heard about the STEP training and thought it was a great idea and worth pursuing. I liked that our trainees weren’t just learning coding, but that the STEP medical coding curriculum also encompassed anatomy, medical terminology, diseases, drugs and computer skills. They also learned how to decipher a medical record, because the jokes about physicians’ handwriting are true.

Our trainees worked in my department while they were studying. Working and studying can be very stressful. Medical coding is a whole new language, which at times must have seemed like Greek. And the flow of work was unfamiliar.

I was there to provide support and encouragement. We would talk about their frustrations. I’d provide reassurance that they’d make it through, and that all the pain someday would be behind them. But during training, the students also seemed to be encouraging each other. They saw themselves as a team, providing moral support, cheering each other on.

We anticipated that the STEP trainees wouldn’t be that productive at first. But with trainees, you’re looking for accuracy. Over time, they’ll pick up speed. Tracy Smith (mentioned in the previous section) is a good worker, a Sinai star. She had her ideas and goals and was on her way. That’s why we picked her for the coding program. She’s doing well.



MARY LOU BOND

You know, we spend thousands of dollars every year trying to recruit people from the coding community, which is very tightly knit. News of vacancies spreads by word of mouth, which makes our advertising and recruiting unnecessary. It might behoove us to take some of those recruiting dollars and put them into programs like STEP, so we can grow the coding community. ”

– MARY LOU BOND, DIAGNOSIS RELATED GROUPS MANAGER,
SINAI HOSPITAL OF BALTIMORE, BALTIMORE, MD.

“Barwood is a limousine and taxi company that operates 24 hours a day and fields 4,000 calls a day. We have a large call center that’s difficult to staff with people with the appropriate skills. So, when the Workforce Development Corporation in Montgomery County asked if I wanted to participate in STEP, I said, ‘Yes!’

People who begin work here often don’t arrive with basic people skills — telephone manners, workplace etiquette, how to finesse clients, the proper dress code.

Thirty years ago, when I got into this business, people obtained these skills from life experience; but not today. And without those skills, it’s hard to move up into supervisory jobs or positions that require workers to deal with more demanding customers.

We sent 16 employees to two months of STEP training, which included instruction in word processing, business writing and business etiquette. Some of the training reiterated things we had been telling our workers. But when somebody outside the company teaches it, the information carries more weight.

The training substantially increased their customer service skills and lessened their day-to-day frustration. My gut feeling is that there has been an improvement in productivity and a decrease in turnover.

I told each trainee that he must be a mentor to other employees and leverage what he learned. I also hope to incorporate some of the best ideas and practices from the STEP training



LEE BARNES

EMPLOYER BENEFIT :

Leverages training dollars

into our own training curriculum. In today’s economy, we’re going to see more people jobless. Skill development is essential in today’s world. ”

– LEE BARNES, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF BARWOOD TRANSPORTATION, KENSINGTON, MD.

“ Comcast selected eight entry-level employees to participate in our training program for Comcast technicians, which trains them to serve customers in cable installation, digital and online areas, and technical services. The STEP program augments our training by providing additional instruction in business communication and customer service, which we would not otherwise have provided.

Through participating in STEP, these technicians will have the opportunity to move at a faster pace toward promotion. They learn how to create a positive experience when interacting with customers, to treat customers with a higher level of professionalism and courtesy. It's not just fixing the problem, but making sure our customers feel cared about and valued. It teaches them to give our customers the white glove treatment.

We wanted to partner with STEP to give our entry-level technicians training above and beyond our budget, to maximize opportunities for people to be successful.

It helps them attain basic competencies — sentence structure, grammar, spelling — that help them with their test-taking skills and writing up field assessments. And

it will be even more important as they move up the career ladder.

The STEP training takes place on company time. Life is very complex these days. People want to go home and be with their families. They want to get the training they need on company time and not be penalized for productivity. And if a tech runs into transportation or child care problems, STEP helps them overcome the obstacle, so they can show up to work and not miss any training time. Just knowing that this wraparound support is available reduces stress so you can focus more on your career.

We believe our participation in STEP will contribute to employee retention. The employees recognize that we value them and are committed to their career development, to make sure they have the skills necessary to do their jobs and move up. I think STEP could have a national application. Private-public partnerships are definitely the way to go in the future.”

EMPLOYER BENEFIT:

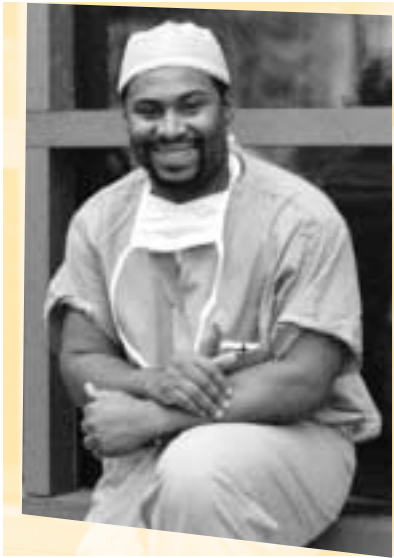
*Better
employee
retention*



PAM STANFORD

– PAM STANFORD, MANAGER OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT
FOR COMCAST OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY, ROCKVILLE, MD.

STEP Working Parents: MOVING UP



Dorian Wise has a strong back and a mile-wide smile. But after working almost 100 hours a week at three jobs and bringing home only \$1,400 a month, the 29-year-old Baltimore man felt like “I was killing myself.”

“It was tough, and things were tight,” says Wise, who managed three jobs as a hospital greeter, a school janitor and a seafood stocker at a grocery store. “But I still managed to save enough to take my two kids to the movies. As long as I can spend time with them, I’m glad. That’s what matters most to me.”

Life is smoother now for Wise, who has completed a 10-month, STEP-financed surgical technician course and is working in a University of Maryland Medical Center operating room. “I maintain a sterile field, prepare syringes and pass instruments,” says Wise, who is now earning almost \$14 an hour, a 50 percent boost from his previous job greeting patients in the hospital’s lobby. I see a whole new career path opening up to me.”

Before he entered the STEP training program, Wise felt happy yet stalled in his job directing and wheeling patients through the hospital. “It was a lovely job, and I enjoyed helping people. But I had gone as far as I could go in the greeter job,” says Wise, who had earlier considered becoming a pediatrician but couldn’t envision endless years of schooling.

Dorian Wise

Wise remembers being awed by surgeons when he attended the cesarean section birth of his son. So, when the opportunity for surgical tech training arose, Wise grabbed it. “It was a steppingstone for me,” he says. “A way to get the training I needed to move up.”

However, unraveling the mysteries of microbiology, anatomy and physiology wasn’t easy for Wise, who was working three jobs and trying to carve out time with his children. “Toward the end, I was mentally drained and physically upset,” he says.

But teachers and classmates created a support system that helped pull him through. “We tried to make each other better. It was a great help and support,” he says. “It became like my second family.” Wise graduated from the program with nearly a straight-A average, an inspiration, he feels, for his children.

Now that Wise has stepped up to a surgical tech job, he hopes to continue his education and become an operating room nurse — a dream he would not have envisioned if the STEP program had not helped him begin his journey.

“There aren’t too many programs for people like me who have worked all their lives but never had a chance to move up,” Wise says. “You need training in this world to survive and stride forward, and the STEP program gives people that chance. It allowed me to work and get paid for going to school. That helped a lot. I see a career path that’s open to many new things.”

**“You need training to survive
and stride forward. STEP gives
people that chance.”**

In Bolivia, Dr. Eduardo Paniagua was living his childhood dream: he was a rising surgeon with a growing practice that helped people in need. But when his homeland's unstable political climate forced him to flee to America in 1989, Paniagua discovered his medical credentials were virtually useless here. To support his family, the physician worked in medical laboratories around Maryland and, once, even took a job as a cable television installer.

“I’m more optimistic about reaching my goals.”

“I worked many jobs, but not as a doctor,” says Paniagua, who lives in Gaithersburg with his wife and two teenage daughters. “But the work was not stable, and I got depressed. I had trained so long to become a surgeon. And I was frustrated that I couldn’t work doing what I love.”

To work here as a surgeon, Paniagua must pass the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE). The three-part exam, however, is grueling, and preparation demands time and money that Paniagua didn’t have.

“I had been trying for many years to take the test, but I had to support my family,” he says in a thick Spanish accent. “I didn’t have any relatives here. I was learning the language. It was impossible for me to pay for the course. I just couldn’t do it by myself.”

An unofficial network of Latin and South American physicians pointed Paniagua to the Montgomery County Career Transition Center in Wheaton, which enrolled the surgeon in the Individual STEP Accounts program. STEP paid Paniagua’s tuition for an eight-month USMLE review course, the first step toward passing the exam that will make him a surgeon again.

“When I met him, I thought, ‘What a waste of skills and education,’ ” says Felix Gonzalez, a center career counselor. “If we could help him return to his profession, we’d have one more doctor who could help Spanish minorities. And he’ll be able to pay more taxes. We think it’s a great, great investment.”

Dr. Eduardo Paniagua

Paniagua studies five hours a day boning up on basic sciences and reviewing clinical practices. “Medicine changes every minute, and what I learned in my country many years ago doesn’t work now,” he says, clasping his small, agile “surgeon’s” hands. “I continuously study. And I jog, so that the blood will go to my brain and help me concentrate.”

Government help is another foreign country for Paniagua, and he sometimes feels ashamed he couldn’t muster his own resources to achieve his goals. “But the STEP program has done the impossible for me,” he says. “This help has changed my life. I’m doing a good thing for my family and me.”



Sherry Byrd had worked for Mercy Medical Center for 25 years when she won her first “award” — a place in the STEP training class for medical coders.

“There were 25 applicants, and I got a spot,” says Byrd, a 53-year-old grandmother of six: She’s raising two “grands” in her Baltimore home. “It was like winning a fellowship and a compliment from your supervisor, who had to recommend you. I looked at it as a gift for hard work.”

The medical coding world was not a strange new land for Byrd. For years, she had worked throughout the hospital assembling and analyzing medical charts, work she found interesting and challenging, yet financially limiting. “I’ve always enjoyed reading charts that tell you all about the patient,” Byrd says. “I knew if I wanted to go on and become a coder, I’d have to get more education. I was hoping to go back to school on my own, maybe get some financial aid. Then the STEP program happened.”

Medical coders translate physicians’ scratchings, test orders, laboratory results and diagnoses into numerical codes for billing and research purposes. A qualified coder must study human anatomy, physiology, disease and medical terminology. Only then is he equipped to understand and learn the hundreds of codes he will regularly use.

Starting medical coders often earn \$14 an hour; not a fortune, but a boost, Byrd says. “Twelve dollars an hour seems like a lot to people who make less, but it’s not if you’ve got two or three children to support,” she says. “The STEP program trains you to earn a little more money, and that

helps a lot. Some experienced coders have their own consulting businesses and make \$25 to \$40 an hour, even more. I know it’s going to take years of experience to do that, but I see that as a path.”

During STEP’s seven-month coding course, Byrd juggled daytime classes with working 24 hours a week on the graveyard shift, which “messed up” her sleeping schedule. At least two days a week, she would return home long enough to shower, grab a bite, then race to school. The routine, however, wasn’t as difficult as retraining her middle-aged brain to study mountains of new material. “You’re learning so much in such a short period,” she says. “I’ve done well, but it wasn’t easy. I was constantly studying, trying to memorize so much material. Many days I said, ‘I can’t do this.’ ”

Support from family, her Mercy supervisor and fellow students helped her through. “This was a sacrifice I was willing to make,” she says. “People who have worked all their lives have goals, too,” says Byrd. “We’re working, taking care of our kids, paying taxes. We deserve the right to have someone help us for once.”



Sherry Byrd

“People who have worked all their lives have goals, too.”

Eric McNeil loves kids, so his heart hurt each time he delivered a syringe filled with chemotherapy to a pediatrics ward in Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. “When I first started delivering meds, I would shake,” says McNeil, 25, who first worked in the Hopkins pediatrics pharmacy as a clerk.

“It was the first time I was exposed to kids who were so sick. It was a shocker.”

These days, McNeil fills hundreds of syringes each day as a new pharmacy technician trained under the STEP program. He still aches for each kid named on each syringe. But now he understands how each drug could save a life. “It’s amazing what these drugs can do,” says McNeil, father to a 6-year-old daughter, Briyana. “I used to wonder how something that smelled so bad could cure kids. But they do. I had no clue when I was on the outside.”

Like many young men, McNeil was at a crossroads in his career during the months before he encountered the STEP training program. The 6-foot-6-inch high school graduate had been picking up college credits toward a social work degree, toying with the idea of becoming a professional basketball player and earning a living as a mail handler.

“STEP showed me a whole new horizon.”

“I needed a change from working at the post office,” says McNeil. “I wanted to try something new. I’ve always liked new challenges.” McNeil started working at Hopkins as pharmacy clerk for \$8.60 an hour.

“I was told in order to progress in the field, you had to become a certified pharmacy technician,” says McNeil, who cares for Briyana each afternoon when she returns from school. “But when you have children, it’s too hard to go to work, then go to school. With STEP, you went to school during your regular workday.”

During the three-month training program, McNeil studied drug classifications and administration, pharmacy techniques, even the basics of running a retail operation. “It was hectic,” says McNeil. “One day you work; the next you go to class. Every Thursday we took tests.” But the program introduced McNeil to “a whole new horizon.”

“It was a great learning experience,” he says. “We had a study hall at the end of the day, which was a big help. All the students got together and helped each other.” McNeil, who now earns more than \$10 an hour, believes that his hard work has inspired his daughter’s education.

“She’d see me study and ask what was I doing. And I’d say, ‘I’m studying, something you’ll be doing in the future.’ Now, when she has her little spelling tests, I help her study. She knows if you study, you get good grades. It all pays off in the end.”



Eric McNeil

When Christine Hill dreamed of working in a hospital, it wasn't in the kitchen. "I've wanted to be a nurse my whole life," says the 27-year-old Silver Spring woman. "I like hands-on care, making people feel better. I thought about going to nursing school, but I didn't have the money."

Instead, Hill, a single mother, spent five years cooking breakfast and lunch for patients at Montgomery General Hospital. "At first it was confusing, preparing different diets for different people, making sure you didn't add something they weren't supposed to eat," she says about the \$10.50 an hour job. "But after a while, it was a breeze. It was nice, hard work. But I wanted to try something new."

Clocking out one afternoon, Hill spotted a recruitment memo for STEP-financed training for nurse technicians, in-the-trenches aides who help change dressings, take vital signs, prick fingers for blood tests and wheel anxious patients to diagnostic tests.

"They posted it, and I took advantage of it," says Hill. "My 4-year-old daughter would get a little upset that I'd spend time in class and not with her. But I explained that Mommy wants to help patients get better, not just work in the kitchen. She understood and was proud of me. My fiancé is proud of me. They even want me to go further."

Hill worked full time and trained in the evening for 125 hours over three months. "It was tough, especially raising a little girl," she says. "I worked my kitchen shift from 6:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. then went to class from 4 to 7. I'd go home, take a shower and get my daughter ready for the next day." Hill found the hands-on training a joy, though she found biology a mystery.

"The teachers were sympathetic, but you still had to learn the material," she says. "I had to study two hours every day. I'd read chapters, go back over what I didn't understand, then write it down. I'd study until 10, then go to sleep so I could wake up at 5." Camaraderie among the STEP trainees made the marathon bearable. In the beginning, they'd boost each other's spirits and wake each other up. As the program progressed, they became true friends.

"My daughter and fiancé are proud of me. They even want me to go further."

The hard work culminated in an absorbing job and new career ambitions. "I want to go back to school and become a nurse, and then maybe even a physician's assistant," says Hill. "When you're working with patients, you're constantly learning new things. It's not simple. But at the end of the day, it's nice to see the patients smiling. You feel like you've done a good job."



Christine Hill

As a U.S. Army soldier in the post Vietnam War era, Kent Marshall lived by two truths:

1. A squad is only as good as its weakest link;
2. Never leave a member behind.

Marshall obeyed that code during the months he trained to become a surgical technician under the STEP program. “We did everything we could to support a few trainees who wanted to drop out,” says Marshall, who folded a struggling student into his successful study group and paired another trainee with a “winner” who helped her forge on. “We lost one,” he says, “but we helped the other two make it through.”



Marshall, who completed the program with straight A’s, is now assisting surgeons in University of Maryland Medical Center operating rooms. He helps maintain a sterile field, prepares and passes surgical instruments. “I’m a mechanic at heart,” says the 48-year-old Baltimore man. “And what more complex piece of equipment is there than the human body?”

Marshall has always loved to fix things. He worked as an aircraft mechanic and a welder before working at the medical center, where he became a rehabilitation aide who helped patients overcome crushing injuries. “I love working with people and knowing I’m helping someone return to a productive life,” says Marshall. “I’ve always been into weight-lifting and body sculpting. Rehabilitation gave me the chance to learn more about anatomy.”

Kent Marshall

For more than a decade, Marshall aced the community college classes he sporadically picked up. But the “stress” of working full time, studying part time and participating in family life with his wife and two children made obtaining a degree a Herculean task. “There was never the time or finances to set me on a career path; it was a dream, but not in reach,” he says.

The STEP surgical technician program allowed Marshall to reap a full-time salary while working part time and training part time. “In the STEP program, the only stress I had to deal with was academic,” he says. “I’d study around the clock, carry a book with me all the time — on the elevator, in the bathroom.”

For Marshall, studying anatomy, microbiology, pharmacology and physiology was less challenging than managing the crisis of confidence that occasionally shook his resolve. “Sometimes I got self-defeating thoughts like, ‘You’re over the hill. You missed the boat. You’re old to try something new,’” he says. But Marshall’s desire to establish a fruitful career path inspired him to defeat those dybbuks. “I wanted to become a surgical tech to be a better provider for my family,” he says. “Maybe someday I’ll become a nurse. Every time I reach one goal, the horizon changes for me.”

“Every time I reach one goal, the horizon changes for me.”

Sounding like a star-struck teen, 32-year-old Teresa Zera Pilson gushes over the sights she’s seen in Mercy Medical Center’s operating room. “My goodness! I saw a breast reduction, a nipple reconstruction, an abdominal hysterectomy and a hernia repair,” says Pilson, a new surgical technician trained under the STEP program. “I love laparoscopic surgery.” Even before Pilson became enamored of internal organs, she enjoyed getting to know the hearts of patients she cared for as a Mercy nurse technician.

“STEP has changed a lot of our lives.”

“I love talking to patients, encouraging them,” says the Randallstown woman. “A lot are lonely and have no one visiting them. So, we are their family. My supervisor said, ‘Teresa, you should become a nurse.’ But I said, ‘I want to work in the operating room.’ ”

Pilson seemed miles away from the OR when she began working at Mercy shortly after high school. She started as a cafeteria cashier, and then worked throughout the hospital as a housekeeper, pharmacy courier and a “support associate” who took vital signs and straightened patient rooms. The operating room grew closer when Pilson began the STEP surgical technician training program last spring. The program allowed her to study part time and to work part time as a nurse technician drawing blood and inserting catheters.

“STEP is great for people who are trying to further their education and make something of their lives,” Pilson says. As a single parent for many years, Pilson spent most after-work hours with her growing son, not expanding her career horizons. “I believe my child is what he is because I spent a lot of my time with him,” says Pilson, a proud mama of James, a 17-year-old who dreams of directing movies. It was James, in fact, who encouraged Pilson to take a stab at STEP.

And it was Mercy, which allowed trainees to split their week between work and study, that enabled Pilson to advance without siphoning too much time from her family, which now includes a new husband. “I wouldn’t have done it now if I had to study in addition to my regular working hours,” she says. “It would have been too much for me.”

As a nurse technician, Pilson earned about \$11 an hour; as a surgical tech, she gets more than \$13. “Just a little something-something,” she says

about the raise. But work is not only about money for the woman who listens to gospel music and participates in her church as a lay minister. “People can tell when you like what you do because you’re good at your job,” she says. “It’s not about the money. I did it for my heart.”

Pilson’s heart is devoted to Mercy — which offered the STEP program that helped her realize a dream. “Mercy is where I want to retire,” says Pilson, who has not missed a day of work in three years. “I love the people. You can never have a low day without someone encouraging you.”



Teresa Zera Pilson

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