

Onward and Upward

Alison Gauld not only qualified as a nurse with the OU—but immediately on qualifying embarked on further OU study and is one of our first Honours Graduates in Nursing Studies. Alison describes momentous changes in her life:

“I got married last weekend, I recently turned 50, and I got my dream job as a nurse in July! So my life really has changed completely.

I was born in Aberdeen, but we emigrated to South Africa in 1971, where I completed my schooling. Unfortunately it wasn't possible for me to go to university because you needed a fair amount of money (there weren't any grants) and my family weren't well off. So I got a job as a draughtswoman.

When I was 20, my mother died from cancer. It was very traumatic. There was no hospice movement and very few treatments, and it affected us all badly. But we carried on, I got married, my son was born, and there was a mortgage to pay. **I couldn't think about studying then, as I was reliant on my job for the income.**

After coming back to the UK in 1998, I was looking for a career change. By then I was Senior Buyer for a petrochemical engineering company, but it was just something I fell into rather than a vocation. Then one day I injured my ankle, and while I was getting it treated in the hospital I saw all these ads for Health Care Assistants. I thought I would give it a try.

I enrolled on the OU Nursing programme before I started my job! When I was looking round the hospital, I met a wonderful ward sister who told me I should consider the OU course. **I'd always been interested in nursing**, particularly after the experience with my mother, **but I never believed I could do it.**

And then my dad became ill with cancer too – this was devastating to our family, but at least medicine had moved on and his treatment was much better. Anyway, I went down to the personnel department and that's how it all began.

Studying was hard work, but the structure of OU courses is so good – you take it one week at a time and you're always prepared for the next stage. That was very important to me, especially at exam time because I tend to get nervous. But if you do the work, you'll get through.

I carried on studying after I qualified; I decided to go for a degree. You know how some people feel there's a book in them somewhere? It was like that for me, except with a degree – ever since my twenties I've felt I had a degree inside me, and **the OU helped me to realise my dream;** I now have an Open University Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Nursing Studies.

I chose the OU rather than another university because of the flexibility. With a mortgage to pay and a household to run, it seemed like the best choice.

My son is grown up now, so I didn't have to juggle parenting with studying. In fact we graduated at the same time, and he started his flying career at the same time as I started nursing. And my husband – who is a cartographer – has been so inspired by my success that he's studying to be an electrician, and loving it. I do know that they're very proud of me.

Dream job! I got my dream job in July, working as a staff nurse on the haematology and oncology ward. We have a lot more success with treating cancer now than a couple of decades ago. We have a lot of leukaemia patients and it's wonderful when they've had their final cycle of chemotherapy and you see them walk out of the hospital, hopefully going back to a normal life. And **every day it's something different – that's the best thing about nursing.**

Advice to other HCAs: I would just say if you even have a glimmer of an idea that you'd like to be a nurse, make that first move. I see so many HCAs who would make such fabulous nurses. Often it's a confidence issue, but it's not as hard as you think, and there'll be support for you all the way.

I know that I could never go back to a 9 – 5 office job. **It's been a whirlwind roller coaster that I started and I'm still on ... there's even a little twinkle in my eye about studying a Masters. You never know."**

The next intake for the OU pre-registration nursing programme is in September 2009, so register for your place now at www.openuniversity.co.uk/rcn or call 0845 300 60 90. RCN members receive

a 10% discount on many OU courses. Find out more about RCN membership at www.rcn.org.uk/membership