



# The San Diego Union-Tribune.

---

Copyright 2008 The San Diego Union-Tribune

June 7, 2008

## **Walking a Familiar Beat**

By Keith Darce

When nursing student Rachel Goff arrived at Rady Children's Hospital in January to begin an internship, she was returning to familiar turf.

Goff became a patient at the hospital May 8, 1987 – just 16 days after her birth – when doctors diagnosed a potentially deadly congenital heart defect.

Now, as a 21-year-old, Goff is using her experience as a pediatric patient, including the 10-inch surgical scar running from the base of her throat down her chest, to connect with sick children.

She has been a nursing intern at Rady for the past five months. Much of her time there is spent sitting with patients who often struggle to come to terms with their circumstances.

Goff said she sometimes shows her scar to them. “For patients who weren't born with a scar, they think it's ugly and they think it's going to ruin their social life,” she said.

She underwent three heart surgeries in her first three years of life. But it wasn't until she was 16, when she had the fourth surgery, that Goff focused her career ambitions on pediatric nursing.

The nurses who helped treat her made a lasting impression, she said.

“I decided that I wanted to be a nurse because I wanted to have contact with patients,” Goff said. “I wanted to talk to them and make them feel as good as I felt at the time.”

Her timing couldn't be better. A growing shortage of nurses is pushing up wages and creating abundant job opportunities at hospitals nationwide.

The trend has produced a tidal wave of applications to nursing schools, but many students who are drawn to the profession by attractive pay rates and job security don't stay for long, said Catherine Todero, director of **San Diego State University's** School of Nursing.

People such as Goff tend to be more successful candidates because their motivations are better aligned with the realities of nursing, Toderò said. "When people have brushes with death or live through horrible health care crises, the connections they make with the people who cared for them. . . . It's almost spiritual," she said.

In the years since Goff's original stay at the children's hospital, located in Kearny Mesa, she moved with her family to the East Coast and became an undergraduate student at Northeastern University in Boston.

Her internship at Rady, which ends June 18, marks the completion of an important circle in her life, she said.

While walking through the hospital's intensive-care unit recently, Goff met a nurse who has been at the facility for 30 years.

"She said, 'I probably took care of you,' and she gave me a big hug," Goff said. "It makes me very proud and happy that I'm here giving back for what they did for me."

Goff's father has no trouble remembering the day he and his wife arrived at the hospital with their newborn. Her skin tone was dusky, not pink like most babies, and she had a heart murmur.

"They took her off to the (catheterization) lab right away," Jim Goff recalled. "It scared the hell out of us."

Goff was diagnosed with the tetralogy of Fallot, named for the French physician who was one of the first to describe the problem in the late 19th century. The condition typically involves three or four heart defects and is a leading cause of cyanosis, or blue-baby syndrome, which occurs when there's too little oxygen in the blood.

If left untreated, more than half of the babies born with the tetralogy of Fallot die before reaching their fourth birthday.

Goff had one of the most serious forms of the condition. Dr. John Lamberti, a heart surgeon who operated on Goff, said Rady Children's Hospital typically sees two or three patients a year with similar diagnoses.

Many of their defects aren't reparable, he said. In Goff's case, the surgeries were a complete success.

Aside from having the scar and visiting a cardiologist for annual checkups, Goff's life has been pretty typical. She was an avid swimmer as a child, and she played on her high school volleyball team.

Goff is finishing her third year of college. When it came time to pick internship sites, she immediately thought of Rady.

The hospital's administrators, however, turned down her request initially because she didn't have pediatric work experience. Lamberti intervened on her behalf.

"The question was, did the fact that she had been a patient here on multiple occasions qualify as previous pediatric experience?" he said. "I used that as the focal point of my argument. That got us over the hurdle."

Goff said working at Rady has only increased her determination to become a pediatric nurse. "I like what I see," she said.

But she hasn't decided where to job-hunt after college. Lamberti was quick to offer an option: "We want her to come back here, of course."

