

Midlife Career Switch: Law to Nursing in Her 40s

Nneka Inez Mitchell

BY LIBBY ZAY

She already had a promising career: Nneka Inez Mitchell, LL.M., RN, had passed the New York bar exam and practiced as an attorney for several years before transitioning to a job managing litigation claims for multinational Fortune 500 insurance companies. But in 2004, when she gave birth to her son at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore, Mitchell watched the nurses around her in awe and longed to be in *their* shoes.

MIKE CIESIELSKI



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“I wished I could get up every morning and have a job that I felt invigorated to come to and that I felt really made a difference in someone’s life,” Mitchell explains.

Walking away from all the securities of her job for a new career, however, seemed like an “insurmountable task” at the time, she says. Although she had a master’s degree, she would need to complete all of the science prerequisites – not to mention that she had a mortgage, school loans, a car payment, and many other responsibilities. “I couldn’t leave my job and salary to go chase a pipe dream,” she explains.

Ten years later, Mitchell’s friend and colleague urged her to pursue her passion after he was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s disease. “He said, ‘I know you’re a great lawyer, but I feel you would be a phenomenal nurse,’” Mitchell recalls. His words and the

timing of his diagnosis were the motivation she needed. Two weeks later, she began taking classes part time at Baltimore City Community College, at the age of 41, while maintaining her litigation management career.

By fall 2016, she had completed her prerequisites and was accepted to UMSON’s Clinical Nurse Leader master’s option, but she declined the offer for financial reasons.

“It was a very difficult decision, since the program was my first choice,” Mitchell says. She opted to complete her Associate Degree in Nursing through the Community College of Baltimore County Catonsville (Maryland), where she served as president of the Catonsville Student Nurses Association and the student speaker at their pinning ceremony. After graduation, she began her nursing career in the oncology unit at Mercy Medical Center, the same hospital where she had given birth to her son and had discovered her desire to become a nurse.

Wanting to continue her education, Mitchell applied to UMSON’s RN-to-Master of Science in Nursing

(MSN) program and was accepted with a full Conway Scholarship last fall. “When I got the letter, I literally wept,” she recalls. “I fell onto my knees, and then I called everyone that I could call to share my great news.”

Mitchell chose UMSON’s Health Services Leadership and Management MSN specialty and believes that her background in litigation and claims will be a boon in the future. She hopes to become an advanced practice registered nurse and, eventually, a nurse educator. “But I always see myself providing some level of direct patient care, because really, that’s what brought me into nursing,” Mitchell says.

Her son is now in 10th grade, and Mitchell says her hard work and academic success serve as an inspiration to him. “He saw me up at 2 a.m. studying and then going to work every day,” she relays. But as she looks back on her decision to start over and follow her dream in her 40s, she has no regrets, saying, “It was the single best career decision I’ve ever made and has been the most dynamic decade of my life to date.” ♦