**New nurse balanced school with pregnancy, newborn**

By Leona Long

Two days after finding out she was pregnant, newlywed Deanna Pavil got another big surprise — an acceptance letter to the nursing program hosted at the University of Alaska Fairbanks’ Kuskokwim Campus in Bethel.

At first, the thought of juggling pregnancy and a newborn baby with a challenging academic program seemed overwhelming. That’s when Pavil called her dad. Charles and Sharon Rodgers had always encouraged their daughter to follow her dreams.

“My dad gave me the push that I needed,” said Pavil, who grew up in Bethel. “He knew this was something I wanted to do, so he wouldn’t let me get off the phone until I said, ‘OK, I can do this.’ I couldn’t have gotten through the nursing program without the help and support of my mom and dad.”

Pavil's family traveled to Anchorage when she was a high school junior when her grandmother needed open-heart surgery. The hospital staff's caring actions inspired Pavil to dream of a career in health care. After graduating from Bethel Regional High School, she worked for four years in medical records at Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Regional Hospital. It wasn’t until Pavil started taking classes to become a certified nurse aide that she discovered her calling to be a nurse.

“I enjoyed working in medical records, but knew it wasn’t what I wanted to do for the rest of my life,” said Pavil, who graduated with an associate of applied science degree in nursing in December 2016. “I wanted to do more to help people and make a difference in their lives. The same week I quit my job, I got a phone call about the CNA class.”

Bethel’s certified nursing assistant program is made possible by a community partnership between UAF's Kuskokwim Campus, the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corp. and Yuut Elitnaurviat, a regional vocational training center. Since 2013, the organizations have worked together to train local residents to fill needed certified nurse aide positions at the YKHC Elder Home. For many students like Pavil, Bethel’s CNA program is a stepping stone to earning an associate of applied science degree in nursing. It’s also a way for them to pursue a degree in health care without having to move away from home.

Many medical providers in rural communities only stay for a few years before moving to an urban area or out of state. Pavil and other UAF community campus nursing students are working to close the revolving door in Alaska’s rural hospitals and clinics. The Kuskokwim Campus is one of 13 distance sites providing student support services and local classes for the University of Alaska Anchorage’s School of Nursing.

“If I didn’t have CNA experience before going into the nursing program, I think it would have been difficult for me to transition into nursing school,” said Pavil, who plans to earn her bachelor’s degree in nursing. “My CNA training and work experience gave me the academic foundation I needed to succeed in a challenging program.”

Pavil described the last semester of the two-year program as the most difficult. After completing rigorous nursing and laboratory skills classes, rookie nurses get hands-on training at hospitals in Bethel, Anchorage and Fairbanks. The students start their practicum observing a seasoned nurse and, as they learn, take on more of the direct patient care until their mentors are observing them.

“The best part of doing my clinical experience was helping people in my community,” said Pavil, who is married to Eric Pavil, who also grew up in Bethel. “When I needed to stay in Anchorage for three weeks, my mom quit her job so she could watch my son, Bennett. My dad also took time off work to watch my son after my babysitter canceled at the last minute, so I could take exams. I am very grateful for my parents and the sacrifices they both made so I could pursue my dream career.”

Last December, Pavil and the four other women in KuC’s nursing cohort were honored with a pinning ceremony marking the completion of their educations and the transition from students to nurses. The ceremony also provided a way for the nurses to thank their families and others for their support and sacrifices.

Pavil now works as a registered nurse at the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corp.’s outpatient clinics.

“We all went through the same thing and had our ups and downs going through the nursing program,” Pavil said. “We stuck with it and had study groups before exams. We pushed each other and were each other’s cheerleaders. I am very grateful for the support of my family, my husband Eric, fellow nursing students and the KuC staff. It made all the difference.”

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*Photo courtesy of Deanna Pavil*  
Deanna Pavil, who graduated from the nursing program hosted at the University of Alaska Fairbanks’ Kuskokwim Campus, visits with her husband, Eric, and son, Bennett, at the pinning ceremony in Bethel celebrating her graduation from nursing school in December 2016.

*Photo courtesy of Deanna Pavil*  
Deanna Pavil stands outside in Bethel after graduating from the nursing program hosted at the University of Alaska Fairbanks’ Kuskokwim Campus in Bethel.