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Speaker 2:

Coming up on Pathways. Maine is home to nurses from all walks of life who have taken different paths to get to where they are. This includes nurses from other countries who are developing more than their nursing skills.

Emily Tadlock:

Thanks for joining us on Pathways. I'm your host, Emily Tadlock. Nurses train and work everywhere, and where they land along their career path can sometimes mean ending up in a completely different country. So joining me today is Northern Light Health Community Coordinator, Victoria Haskell. And Isabel Echano, an international nurse at Northern Light AR Gould Hospital. Hi ladies.

Victoria Haskell:

Hi.

Emily Tadlock:

Hello. Thanks for joining me today. So Isabel, let's start with you. Tell me your story. How did you end up in Presque Isle, Maine?

Isabel Echano:

So I have an agency and they placed me here really. It wasn't my choice. When they told me that I will be in Maine, the first thing I asked was like, "Where's Maine?" Because I never really hear about Maine in the Philippines. And I looked it up and it was all the way up here, almost pretty much Canada area.

Emily Tadlock:

So you're originally from the Philippines and what made you decide to become an international nurse anyway?

Isabel Echano:

Well, I went to nursing school because my mom told me to. I think that's what everyone says, I think. But as I went through school, I started liking it and I realized that, "Oh, this is actually for me. My mom was right. Glad I listened." The culture in the Philippines is once you're a nurse there, you're not just to work and stay in the Philippines because we don't get paid well in the Philippines. So our mindset is to leave the country as a nurse. People go to Saudi, in UAE, UK, US mostly. And that's what I had growing up. So as I went through nursing school, "Okay, I'm going to finish my nursing school, take my exam, have a work experience for two, three years, and then I'll leave. I'll start processing my visa and stuff."

But then COVID hit, which they stopped letting nurses to leave the country because of the shortage. And then eventually they opened it up again and nurses can leave. And it was just perfect because I was ready to leave really. I was just fed up with how the situation is in the Philippine nursing scene. And then the moment they said like, "Okay, you're going to be assigned in Presque Isle, I'm like, "Yes, sure, wherever, take me out of here."

Emily Tadlock:

Yeah, "Get me out of here."

Isabel Echano:

And then I moved here March of 2022. And it's been great so far. So I think the winter was almost over when I arrived, there was still snow, but I was like, "Okay, I can work with this." And then spring came, summer, fall, it's great. And then winter again.

Emily Tadlock:

Which is very different.

Isabel Echano:

Yes.

Emily Tadlock:

Yeah. So we'll get back to that in just a minute. So you mentioned that you're part of an international agency. So before we go any further, I kind of wanted to give Victoria a chance to explain a little bit about how international nursing works here at Northern Light Health.

Victoria Haskell:

So we work with three separate agencies and we just work to try to teach them about the different parts of Maine. And then they tell the nurses about the different parts of Maine, like AR Gould, then all the way down to Portland.

Emily Tadlock:

So we have them placed at several of our different member hospitals?

Victoria Haskell:

Yep.

Emily Tadlock:

So what drove us to start asking international nurses to join our ranks?

Victoria Haskell:

I think this started about five years ago with starting the international nurse program. But I think it brings a lot to the state, having the international nurses here because a lot of them do convert and end up living here after their contract is up.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay. And so do you know exactly how many international nurses we have placed throughout Northern Light Health?

Victoria Haskell:

We have 57 total.

Emily Tadlock:

Wow. 57 international nurses. Can you give us an idea of what countries are represented?

Victoria Haskell:

Yeah. So mostly we have the population from the Philippines but we also serve people from Jamaica, Nigeria, Kenya, India, Iraq, Lebanon. Lots of different places around the world.

Emily Tadlock:

Wow, that is really cool. Isabel, I'm going to come back to you now. What was it like you moving here? You moved here on your own?

Isabel Echano:

Yes, I did.

Emily Tadlock:

And you left your family.

Isabel Echano:

Yes, just my mom, my brother, and my dad.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay, what was that like?

Isabel Echano:

It was okay. I do get homesick, but moving here, I was very excited. My parents, especially my mom, was very excited. She would even ask me almost every week, "When are you leaving?" Like, "Okay, I am leaving soon, mom." It was fairly easy, but when I do get homesick, I just cry, call them. But it's okay.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay. So Isabel came here on her own, but we have a lot of international nurses that come and bring their families even. What is that transition like? It can't be easy to figure out housing where you're going to stay. And then when you move here, the food's different, the grocery store is different, what you buy is different. How do you navigate that? Isabel, I'll let you answer. And then Victoria, I'd like for you to answer and talk about how we help people navigate that.

Isabel Echano:

Oh, right. Well, the food, it's American food. We have it in the Philippines, but what I just do is I am so glad that I'm able to cook. So I just buy stuff from Walmart or 'Graves' and just cook Filipino food at home. And if I want American food, I can just go out or just have my partner cook it.

Emily Tadlock:

What about housing, how was that?

Isabel Echano:

Housing? Well, I think my agency was talking to someone. It's like they reserved a place for me, but then by the time I got to talk to the landlord, they gave it to someone the day before. They gave the lease to someone else. So I had to look for something else somewhere else. So I'm glad I found somewhere nearby

the hospital. It was nerve wracking because when I moved here, I only had a budget for hotel but within a week I should be able to find a place. It was nerve wracking, but luckily I was able to find some place, but from what I know now, it's harder for people to find a place here now.

Emily Tadlock:

I think we're seeing that everywhere across the state. But we do have resources and I think our staff do the best they can to help support and find stuff too. Victoria, I'll let you talk about that.

Victoria Haskell:

So the agencies do try to find places for people, but if an international nurse was looking to live here, or if they just needed a new place to live while they were working their contract, then I would be able to help them find a place for their family. And I help find resources for their family too, schools for the kids and after school programs and just things that maybe they wouldn't necessarily prepare for coming here. Like, "Oh, that's right, I have to register my kid for school and maybe finding a house near a school." There's just a lot of stuff that, when they come here, they realize they might need.

Emily Tadlock:

And I think that's really important that we offer that information and we not only offer information about American culture and how to get into school and how to purchase a home and different things like that, where to go to buy clothes. Because had you ever heard of TJ Maxx? Is that something that you guys have in the Philippines?

Isabel Echano:

No, we don't. We don't have those. We have big malls with different shops in it, but Walmart, TJ Maxx, Walgreens, those are...

Emily Tadlock:

Not things you had ever heard of.

Isabel Echano:

Yes, Marden's.

Emily Tadlock:

Marden's, Yeah.

Isabel Echano:

I love Marden's.

Emily Tadlock:

So you would've never known where to go to find some of those things without someone helping you along the way, which I think is really cool. And so we do some of that, but we also help connect people with cultural resources. Isabel, you were able to find some of that here through your coworkers. But Victoria, if you travel into Bangor or Portland even, there are lots of different cultures living in those communities, and so I think it's kind of neat that there's so many different cultural resources in those areas.

Victoria Haskell:

Yeah, it's really nice. And I've worked to get all of those in one place so that when people ask, I can quickly defer them to those places.

Emily Tadlock:

Awesome. The Philippines is very different than America. What was the biggest culture shock for you?

Isabel Echano:

Well, initially it would have to be people saying hi when you pass by them on the streets. "Hi, how are you?" I'm like, "Do I know this person?" I was weirded out really. And then I realized that people are just really nice and they say hi, even if they don't know you. Pedestrians have the right of way, here pedestrians just walk through. And I'm shocked, like, "Oh my gosh, they didn't even look left. Or they don't care. That was so scary."

Emily Tadlock:

They know people are scared are going to slow down for them.

Isabel Echano:

And seniors still work even at McDonald's, which is great because back home when you start getting at 60, 65, you don't really work anymore. You let your kids work and then support you. That's the culture. But here, they don't pass that... What do you call that?

Emily Tadlock:

Burden?

Isabel Echano:

Yes. Yes. That burden to your kids. You have your own life and then you have-

Emily Tadlock:

Your kid life, your family life.

Isabel Echano:

Yeah. And people talk about the weather a lot. Well, because in the Philippines there's only rain or shine. That's all the weather that we have. But here, it's always changing. So I was like, "Oh, no wonder they always ask about the weather because it's always changing."

Emily Tadlock:

Wow. Yeah. So where you come from in the Philippines, is it busy? Is it city life, is it more rural?

Isabel Echano:

I grew up living in... It's like in the middle of mountains and city. And then when I graduated, when I started working, I moved to the city. So I really love the city. So when I moved here, I was like, "Oh, great. This is a nice, slow paced life. Peaceful, simple." I like it.

Emily Tadlock:

Yeah. Okay. Well, that's good to know. I was going to say, what do you like most about living in the Presque Isle, Maine area?

Isabel Echano:

Well, besides from the people, life is just simple here and which is something that I really liked. I think I'm past that age where partying and stuff. And I'm surprised to see that there's a big Filipino community here. Because when I looked at Maine on Google Maps, I'm like, "I don't think Filipinos would want to work here because of just how far up north it is and how cold it is there." But when I arrived here, I've met a lot of Filipino people here, and they're just great. They're so supportive and that's a few things that I like about Maine.

Emily Tadlock:

That's great. And so you mentioned that community. Again, I'm going to mention Victoria's title here is community coordinator. That's one of the things that you do is work to help usher in these international nurses and help them feel at home and part of a community and help connect them to resources? Tell us a little bit about that.

Victoria Haskell:

So I really try to work hard to give them a sense of community. And I have a newsletter that I put out every month, and I try to tell them about Maine and the things going on in Maine. And I definitely want to start working with the parts of Maine that are more rural, like up here. The places that people coming into Maine may not know much about. So I want to work to educate people on the different parts of Maine and what Maine has to offer.

Emily Tadlock:

And it has to offer a lot more, than just snow, I promise Isabel. So what are some of the things that you've discovered you enjoy now? Have you tried snowshoeing or sledding or anything like that?

Isabel Echano:

I tried skiing and I don't know, I think I just had a bad first experience and I never really did it again, just because... so went to Mars Hill, BigRock. It was me and my partner, and I did great on the bunny hill. And we hopped on the lift and 10 minutes later I'm like, "This is taking a while." So apparently we hopped on the wrong lift. We went all the way at the top of the mountain, and he was just like, "Oh, just do pizza." I'm like, "I can't do pizza." So I just took off my skis and just went on my butt and just slid down.

Emily Tadlock:

Well, you made it down, you made it down the mountain.

Isabel Echano:

I did. And a lot of the people who were skiing there was stopping by and asking like, "Hey, are you okay? Are you injured? Do you need help?" I'm like, "No, I'm okay. I haven't broken any bones yet." I'll give it a try some other time. But I do like hiking.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay, great. There's lots of that in this area.

Isabel Echano:

Kayaking. Oh my gosh, that's nice. Just basking in the sun. And the lakes are great too. The beaches, maybe it's too cold for me. But the lakes, they get warm during summer so that I can dip myself into.

Emily Tadlock:

I love it. Awesome. So then now we've kind of talked about some of the recreational things, differences. Tell me a little bit about the differences between nursing in the Philippines and nursing and here in Maine.

Isabel Echano:

Oh, well nursing here would be definitely much easier work compared to the Philippines. I have maximum of six patients because I work nights, so I have maximum of six patients. We have CNAs, our charge nurse are very helpful. But in the Philippines, we were doing primary nursing at first, but then when COVID hit, we did functional nursing, which I was handling about 20 patients. It's either I could be a medication nurse or a charge nurse, but still it's a lot of things to keep in mind handling 20 lives per shift.

Emily Tadlock:

That's a lot.

Isabel Echano:

And we do eight hours of per shift, so we have to be at work five days in a week. But here you only have to go three days because you have to do 12 hour shifts, which is great. I feel like work and life balance is better here. Plus if I do overtime, I can see it in my paycheck. I get to have fun with my money. But back home, even if you work tirelessly 16 hours a day, five days or six days a week even, you don't really feel it because we get paid.... Do you want to know how much I get paid in the Philippines?

Emily Tadlock:

Sure.

Isabel Echano:

\$250 a month as a nurse. That's why we just suck up those two years of experience just to leave.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay. Well, that's interesting to know. I mean, and I think it's also interesting that you've been able to move to Presque Isle, Maine and find several people that are also Filipino and create your own community up here. How was it for you and meeting people from Presque Isle, Maine? Were they welcoming, was the community welcoming?

Isabel Echano:

Oh, yes. Everyone here is very welcoming. I'm so glad that I was placed here. When I started here in AR Gould, I was training with a Filipino nurse who's a staff here. She's not a travel nurse, she's a staff here, and she walked me through everything, which is great. I felt it made it easier for me to transition. She can tell me, "Oh, here we do this. I know back in the Philippines, you do this, but here you can't do this, but you can do this and that."

Emily Tadlock:

Okay. So it was good to have that support and that role model to really look to?

Isabel Echano:

Yes.

Emily Tadlock:

I want to go off of something you just mentioned that the nurse who trains you is also Filipino. She was an international nurse, but now she is staff and she lives here full time. She decided to stay in Presque Isle, Maine. So Victoria, how many international nurses do we have decide to stay in Maine?

Victoria Haskell:

So over the past four years, we've had 83 people to decide to stay.

Emily Tadlock:

Wow. I mean, 83 people, it seems like a small number in a large population, but in terms of working in a hospital system, 83 people from different countries coming here and wanting to stay in Maine, that's a big deal. We're doing something right, I think.

Victoria Haskell:

Yep. And in the time that I've been here, I think about every nurse except for one has decided to be a permanent staff member and live here full time.

Emily Tadlock:

Wow. So Isabel, would you consider living in Maine?

Isabel Echano:

Oh, definitely. Maybe I'll move to Southern Maine.

Emily Tadlock:

Southern Maine, where it's a little bit warmer.

Isabel Echano:

Northern Maine is too cold. Southern Maine, I do like. Yes.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay. Well, that's good to know. Well, and it's also nice to know that our Maine communities are welcoming. I don't know if you can tell from the way that I talk, that I'm not originally from Maine. I am from the US but from North Carolina, which is a southern state in the United States, and moved to Maine and also found the culture very welcoming and decided to stay here as well. And have now lived in Maine for about seven years. And it's home. It's home.

Isabel Echano:

It is, it's nice. It's calming being here.

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Emily Tadlock:

What would you say to encourage another international nurse who may be listening to this podcast, who knows, to come work in Maine and work with Northern Light Health?

Isabel Echano:

Well, get your experience, that's for sure, before going to another country and working here because I think my experience in the Philippines really prepared me, shaped me, to be a good enough nurse here.

Emily Tadlock:

Good, good. And Victoria, what would you say for international nurses looking to even finish out their contracts and stay in Maine?

Victoria Haskell:

I would say that Maine's a great place to live and we're continuing to build our community for international people. It's a great place to live.

Isabel Echano:

I agree. It is. I'm glad that I'm here.

Emily Tadlock:

Awesome. Thanks ladies.

Speaker 2:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Pathways. Please join us next time for a new episode. There are several ways you can tune in on our website at northernlighthealth.org/healthyhappywise. We are also on Apple, YouTube, and Spotify, which makes it easy for you to listen on the go on your favorite app-