

Announcer:

Coming up on Pathways, they are the breath behind the recovery.

Jessica Breton:

I remember we were shadowing one day, and our patient was crashing, and then all of a sudden this person came in with this machine, put it on the patient. The patient turned around. That person just came, saved the day, and left. I was like, "What was that? And who was that?" They're like, "Oh, that was respiratory therapy."

Announcer:

When every breath counts, respiratory therapists step in with skill, urgency, and heart, from emergency rooms to intensive care units, they are the steady hands helping patients breathe easier.

Emily Tadlock:

And we're back with another episode of Pathways, part of Northern Light Health's Healthy, Happy, and Wise podcast series. I'm your host, Emily Tadlock, and today we're breathing easy with Jessica Breton. She is a respiratory therapist at Northern Light Mayo Hospital. Thanks for being all with me, Jessica.

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, of course.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay, so first off, what is a respiratory therapist?

Jessica Breton:

A respiratory therapist? We are specialized in cardiopulmonary, so we deal with a patient population that has breathing issues, anywhere from COPD, to cystic fibrosis, to pulmonary fibrosis. And we do deal a lot with also cardiac patients as well, because the heart and lungs do go together most of the time.

Emily Tadlock:

So in easy layman terms, people who are having trouble breathing-

Jessica Breton:

Yes.

Emily Tadlock:

... see you?

Jessica Breton:

Yes.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay. So respiratory therapists, I think we saw a lot more of them and heard a lot more about respiratory therapists during COVID. Yeah?

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, for sure. Our profession has definitely grown since COVID. Even now, a lot of people don't know what respiratory therapists are, but I do think that we've come out of the woodworks since the COVID pandemic, since it was a respiratory pandemic.

Emily Tadlock:

And maybe talk a little bit about what you do, specifically, for those of us who, fortunately, haven't had to necessarily come in contact with a respiratory therapist, for whatever reason, or unfortunately, if they get to know you I have today. Tell us a little bit about exactly what you do and how you would help a patient.

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, for sure. So I mean, it's really a wide range. We work from little bitty babies to all the way to end of life. So we can do outpatient things. We do the diagnostic test for COPD, asthma, the pulmonary function breathing test.

So I mean, that's not terrible when you come and see us for that.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay, yeah.

Jessica Breton:

Or you could roll in the emergency department and we help put a breathing tube in and put you on a life support machine, or a mechanical ventilator is the medical term. But I mean, our day varies from going to a birth, to helping somebody transition to end of life.

Emily Tadlock:

Wow. That is a big range of helping patients.

Jessica Breton:

Yes.

Emily Tadlock:

So I wouldn't say that your days are identical.

Jessica Breton:

No, not always.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay. So typical day, you come in and what happens?

Jessica Breton:

Yes. So here at Northern Light Mayo, we have a lot of outpatient procedures. So like today, I have, I believe, five pulmonary function tests that I do. So that's the breathing test that diagnose COPD asthma. I just instruct them on how to breathe. We send the report to a lung doctor, they review it. And then, I could get done a pulmonary function test and get called to the emergency department for a code blue, or to do a

nebulizer on somebody that comes in in a COPD exacerbation. So I mean, it's hard to really say what I could be doing in any particular day.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay. Well, that makes things exciting.

Jessica Breton:

Yes.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay. So to become a respiratory therapist, what did you have to do?

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, so right now in New England, or Northern Maine, I guess, it's an associate's degree. It's a two-year program. There's a bunch of pre-reqs that you'll have to do before, and then you'll spend two years in your respiratory classes. South of here, like in Boston, that kind of area, it's a bachelor's degree.

But up in Maine, there's just two programs. One in Southern Maine at SMCC, and then there's one at KVCC in Kennebec Valley-

Emily Tadlock:

Kennebec Valley.

Jessica Breton:

... in, I believe, it's Fairfield. So there's only two accredited programs in Maine for respiratory therapy, currently, and those are both associates. Once you go south, a lot of them are bachelor programs. That's what they're going towards now. So for me in particular, I went to SMCC, got my associates, and then I just went back online and got my bachelor's at Boise State University.

Emily Tadlock:

Oh, congratulations.

Jessica Breton:

So you do have the option as well, which is nice.

Emily Tadlock:

Awesome. And for those interested, there is different levels of respiratory therapy as well, right? Respiratory therapy one and two?

Jessica Breton:

Yeah. So Northern Light, specifically, we have a clinical ladder. So you would start out as a Respiratory Therapist 1 and then the clinical ladder you can build up to a Respiratory Therapist 3, for Northern Light.

But also, in the respiratory profession, you can also get specialty credentials. So you have your registered respiratory therapist once you pass both of your boards. So for myself, I went back and got my adult critical care specialty. So I have my RRTBS-ACCS. And they have a bunch of different ones. You could do specialized in sleep labs, so do overnight sleep studies. You could do pulmonary function testing, you

could do asthma education, neo peds, so babies, that kind of thing. So there's a wide range that you can do.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay, that's really interesting. So for those people who are interested in just getting their foot in the door, we do have an Earn While You Learn program that we do at Northern Light Health in collaboration with Kennebec Valley Community College, KVCC, like you mentioned earlier, where they could work for Northern Light Health part-time as, it's different at each place, but typically something along the lines of a patient experience aid, and then do their schooling. So work part-time, go to school, but maintain full-time hours, and pay, and benefits to become a respiratory therapist with Northern Light Health. So I think that's a really interesting way to help promote the profession.

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, for sure. It's a great program. I wish that was around when I was doing it. So like you said, it's like a work to grow. So they'll be working alongside respiratory therapists. So it's great for when you're in school, because you have respiratory therapists that can help you with homework, help you with study. It's just nice to have that resource, and to get your hands dirty while you're still in school.

Emily Tadlock:

Which is, I think, I don't know about a lot of other people, but for me, hands-on learning is really the best way that I learn. And I have a funny feeling that for people who are interested in this type of work, hands-on is going to be critical to really learning how to do the job.

Jessica Breton:

Yes, for sure.

Emily Tadlock:

So how did you get into respiratory therapy?

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, so in high school I did a lot of college credits in high school, and we also were required, when doing that, to go to the vocational school. So I had to pick a program. So I did the CNA program and I worked as a CNA all in high school.

Emily Tadlock:

Oh, okay.

Jessica Breton:

And that's when I learned I did not want to be a nurse. I love my nurses out there, but I remember we were shadowing one day, and our patient was crashing, and then all of a sudden this person came in with this machine, put it on the patient, the patient turned around, and that person just came, saved the day, and left. And I asked my nurse who I was shadowing, I was like, "What was that? And who was that?" They're like, "Oh, that was respiratory therapy. They just started that patient on BiPAP. That's just what they do. They come in and save the day and then leave." And I was like, "That was kind of cool."

Emily Tadlock:

Some heroes wear capes, some bring in machines to help people breathe. I love it.

Jessica Breton:

Yeah. So that really exposed me. And I did job shadowing and I fell in love with it. So here I am.

Emily Tadlock:

Wow.

Jessica Breton:

Yeah.

Emily Tadlock:

So it's kind of neat too, that you've experienced some different positions within the hospital, to find out that respiratory therapy was the pathway, if you will. And just kind of toot-toot my own horn for the name of the podcast, but it's neat that you got to explore different types of pathways that eventually led you to respiratory therapy.

Jessica Breton:

In my short career, it's been great. I mean, I started out at Eastern Maine, and I still worked there per diem, as a staff therapist, got lots of experience. And then I decided to join the travel bandwagon. So we do have the option, as respiratory therapists, I traveled for about two years. Worked in Boston for a year. That was a great experience. And then came back to here at Northern Light Mayo, my hometown, and took a manager position. So it's just crazy how much you can grow in the profession as well.

Emily Tadlock:

That's awesome. So as you were just mentioning, respiratory therapists are needed everywhere. Why in Northern Light Mayo Hospital? Or even just Northern Light Health in general, what is it about working for Northern Light?

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, Northern Light's been great to me ever since I started. Like I said, I've been in the Northern Light system for six years now. Eastern Maine is a great place to experience. Mayo always has had a special place in my heart because it's my hometown, it's my community. And I know that we need respiratory therapists to have patients be safe and to make a difference. So I wanted to make sure that this community and hospital had that available to them.

Emily Tadlock:

I love that. What would you say is your favorite part of your job?

Jessica Breton:

My favorite part? I love teaching, and we're always teaching as respiratory therapists, with nursing, providers, everybody, because there's always something new to learn, because we're a specialty. So we're kind of turned to to be the experts on the lungs and breathing. So that's why I really like that part of it, is being specialized, and like I said, no day is the same. It could be a slow day, it could be a busy day, you just never know.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay. Or you could be on a podcast.

Jessica Breton:

Or yeah, you could be on a podcast.

Emily Tadlock:

So what would you say to encourage other people to look at respiratory therapy as a possible career path?

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, I would definitely encourage to job shadow, because like I said, it's really a wide range of things we do. So it's really important to see what we do. It's more than giving breathing treatments. It's more than running the mechanical ventilators. There's a lot of different little aspects that a lot of people aren't aware of. So it's good to just get a good idea of what it entails.

Emily Tadlock:

I think that's really important, because I think I have, fortunately, been able to follow you around today and see some of the different things that you guys actually do. I don't think people are really aware of it. If you are even generally aware of what a respiratory therapist is, you typically think hospital room, someone needing to be on a ventilator. That's the type of thing that you think of and associate with respiratory therapy. But there's so much stuff that you guys do to help diagnose breathing issues and help treat even.

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, and manage for sure.

Emily Tadlock:

And manage, yeah.

Jessica Breton:

Because a lot of these people with COPD, I mean, that's not a curable disease. It's something you have to manage it.

Emily Tadlock:

You've mentioned COPD a couple of times. Can you just-

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. And that's really common in this community, actually, I think Piscataquis County is actually one of the highest rating for COPD patients.

Emily Tadlock:

Wow. So not only is it critically important to just have respiratory therapists on staff, but especially for Maine, and our communities, and the people, especially in our rural areas like here.

Jessica Breton:

Yes. So that's why this sponsorship, learn and grow program, is a great way to get the profession out there, and to get more helping hands for the state of Maine.

Emily Tadlock:

We did talk about you respiratory therapists coming in and saving the day, but not every day can be easy, right? There's got to be challenges, just like any job?

Jessica Breton:

Yes, for sure, especially, in a lot of things that we do. Because like I said, we're dealing with little babies and all the way to the elderly. And if respiratory is usually being called, it's usually not great. So it can be difficult, but I will never forget, one of my preceptors always said, "We're the calmest in the room when stuff's not great." And it kind of sets the aura and everybody kind of just looks to us, even though we know what's happening in front of us.

But it's just our job, and the team's job is just to make it the most comfortable, or do the best we can. And it is hard in the role that we do play. So I mean, every day you might not save the day, but it's just a matter of doing the best you can, and just remembering why you're here, and why you're doing it. And that's all you can do, is show up and give it your best.

Emily Tadlock:

And I like that. It must give you some sort of fulfillment and-

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, for sure.

Emily Tadlock:

Yeah.

Jessica Breton:

And like I said, that's the other thing, you could help somebody transition to the end of life in the morning, and then you kind of set the precedents for the day, and then at 12 o'clock you get called to go to a delivery of a beautiful, healthy baby. So...

Emily Tadlock:

There's definitely variety.

Jessica Breton:

Yes.

Emily Tadlock:

And I think it's important that we talk about the good and the bad. I mean, this is your career, this is what you're going to be doing-

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, for sure.

Emily Tadlock:

... and hopefully loving. It sounds like you do.

Jessica Breton:

Yes, for sure.

Emily Tadlock:

Loving the career that you do. So it's important, I think, to point out the good things and the not so great things.

Jessica Breton:

Yeah. But like you said, every job kind of has that, but-

Emily Tadlock:

It does. Yeah, absolutely.

Jessica Breton:

... just remember why you're there.

Emily Tadlock:

Exactly. So when you started in your career, think back a little bit, first day on the job as a respiratory therapist, that must have been nerve wracking.

Jessica Breton:

For sure, yeah.

Emily Tadlock:

But you're not just thrown into it. Northern Light Health has a really good mentor program to help get respiratory therapists acclimated to their jobs, yeah?

Jessica Breton:

Yes, a hundred percent. So like I said, I started at Eastern Maine, I believe they do a 13-week orientation. And everybody's great. If you're not comfortable, you can get extended. But they really make sure that you're ready. They set you up for success, for sure.

And even after coming off orientation, you have the resources and the people to turn to. Here at Northern Light Mayo, we've been actually utilizing our mothership, Eastern Maine. So I've been taking both of my new grads to Eastern Maine for orientation.

Emily Tadlock:

Oh, okay.

Jessica Breton:

So they get exposed and experienced to more critical care patients, so they feel more comfortable being at a critical access hospital, which is super important. A lot of people think working at a smaller hospital would be easy, or at least in our role, it's not, because you don't have as many resources. But we do try to



make sure that you're pretty well-rounded, and have everything that you need to be the best, and perform, and give the best patients the best care.

Emily Tadlock:

I love that. And it's really cool that you're able to collaborate with the different types of hospitals-

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, for sure.

Emily Tadlock:

... Within our system, within the North Light Health system.

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, respiratory is a small world. So it was great that I had relations with the Eastern Maine crew, and I was able to make connections. And they've been more than willing to help us with orientations, and even have offered us to come over for skills day for our respiratory therapists here.

Emily Tadlock:

Oh, great.

Jessica Breton:

So that's great. So that's awesome that Northern Light, we work as a system, versus as an each individual hospital.

Emily Tadlock:

It sounds like there's a lot of support there?

Jessica Breton:

Yes. Yep. And I've also supported CA Dean. We go up there and we'll do education. So we try to help each department, all of our therapists over system-wide. And not just therapists, even nursing. Because CA Dean doesn't have a respiratory therapist, unfortunately. But our therapists will go up there and do education to make sure that nurses feel comfortable with all things respiratory.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay. Well, what about support for continuing to grow in your career?

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, so there's definitely room to grow within your career in Northern Light. We have the clinical ladder, and as far as the support, when I went back for my bachelor's, they do offer tuition reimbursement. So that's really good. And flexible with schedules and that kind of thing, knowing that I was in school. So yeah, they've been supportive, for sure.

Emily Tadlock:

That's great.

Jessica Breton:

Yeah.

Emily Tadlock:

So this sounds like a career that you could start in and then flourish in.

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, for sure.

Emily Tadlock:

Love that.

Jessica Breton:

Yeah.

Emily Tadlock:

Thank you so much for being on with me today.

Jessica Breton:

Yeah, of course.

Emily Tadlock:

I've loved learning so much about your profession, and what you do. And yeah, next thing you know, I'll come in with a cape, and maybe you can just run around, and sit in rooms with the cape on. Save the day.

Jessica Breton:

Right, yes, yes.

Emily Tadlock:

I like it.

Jessica Breton:

So go to respiratory school, not nursing.

Emily Tadlock:

Um... So yeah, so take advantage of our respiratory therapy program anywhere in the state and work at any of the Northern Light Health hospitals. There's plenty of places to work. Northern Light Health, wink, wink is a pretty great place to be.

Jessica Breton:

Yes.

Emily Tadlock:

Awesome. Thanks, Jessica.

Jessica Breton:

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You're welcome.

Announcer:

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