Finally, the long awaited graduation day had arrived: a day that had been five years in the making, or twenty-three, depending on who was counting. I was finally going to graduate from Viterbo University, a place that I called home since the day I got my acceptance letter in high school. It felt surreal, knowing that I was done with nursing school and about to embark on a wonderful, life-long journey.
was proud to walk across the stage to receive my diploma, but what had meant even more to me was receiving my nursing pin the night before. We were able to choose who would pin us and I chose my mother and my aunt, both of whom are nurses. I am the fifth generation of nurses on my mother’s side, so it seemed only fitting to choose them.

When I walked across that stage, I knew that being done with school meant I would have to take the NCLEX. However, I was not prepared for my authorization to test (ATT) to show up a mere three days after I graduated. I had been told it would take about two weeks to be processed and I had mentally prepared myself for this wait.

I panicked for a day or two after the ATT arrived. What was I thinking getting myself into this! This test was the culmination of all that I had learned in my years at Viterbo! After the initial shock and panic wore off, I jumped back into reality and scheduled my test date. I did not want to wait too long to take the test because that would have given me more time to drive myself crazy. So I scheduled my test for three weeks later and started studying.

Everyone has different ways of studying in nursing school, so naturally everyone will have different ways of getting ready for the NCLEX. Here are just a few tips that helped me get ready.

1. Get an NCLEX book as soon
as you start nursing school and use it to study for tests. This familiarizes you with the NCLEX style of questions. It will also be helpful if your tests in school are written in the same style.

2. Set a study schedule for the test that works well with your studying style. For me it was working 1-2 hours every day. Some of my classmates took an NCLEX review course that they found to be beneficial in learning testing strategies and question types.

3. Use multiple books, CDs, and websites. This helps you get a wider array of questions and a format for study.

Finding Your First Job as an RN

The search for a new job can be an interesting experience, with many different factors to take into consideration. I had decided that the Twin Cities was one of the places I could possibly move to, so I started looking at hospitals there five months before my graduation. In January, I arranged to tour a few hospitals in the area, hoping to get a better feel for which facilities could possibly be the right fit for me. When I toured Hennepin County Medical Center (HCMC), I was able to meet with the nurse managers of the newborn intensive care unit (NICU) and the pediatrics unit. I especially enjoyed meeting the nurse manager of the NICU because she took the time to get to know me. She was interested in why I wanted to work in the NICU and wanted to make sure that it would be the right fit. After this meeting, I felt more confident that this facility would be a good fit for me.

I kept in contact with the nurse manager over the next few months and was able to let her know when I sent in my application in April. We set up an interview for a week later and I started reviewing interview questions. Having already met with the nurse manager, I felt much more at ease when I went in for the interview. At the end of the interview, she offered me the job and I accepted!

My First Job Adventures

As is normal when starting a new job, I was very nervous on my first day. My first two weeks were full of orientation, both hospital wide and unit-based. It is very important that you find a facility that has an orientation process that will be a good fit for your learning style. HCMC has a three-day orientation for all of the new nurses together and then follows it with unit-based training. I spent my first two weeks really learning the unit policies and basics. I never thought my brain could be as overloaded with information as it was during nursing school, but those two weeks proved me wrong! There is always a great deal of information to take in when you start a new job,

Remember that sometimes you will need to step a little outside of your comfort zone and allow yourself to build up your confidence with harder skills or patients.
but make sure to allow time to rest.

I will never forget my first day with a patient assignment. I only had one baby and I was terrified. This infant was only about four pounds; I thought I would break her when I picked her up. Needless to say, I survived the day, and many more after that.

I really felt that the orientation process was a good fit for me. It was a nice slow pace, allowing me to practice the skills I learned until I felt very comfortable with them. This type of orientation process really allows the new nurse to become more confident with each skill set before moving on. I was able to learn to care for our most uncomplicated patients and move on to learning about our most complicated, like babies on ventilators.

A familiar stereotype is that older nurses often “eat their young,” but I have experienced none of that. I have been blessed to be surrounded by very supportive and knowledgeable nurses. This group includes nurses who have been in the unit for over 30 years and one nurse who has only been there a few months longer than I have. They were integral to my orientation and are a source of ongoing support. There is always something new to learn. I have never been made to feel that any question I asked was a bad one. This kind of support has made the last year so much better than I ever thought it could be.

We try to keep dispelling that negative stereotype in our unit by having nursing students come and learn about what we do. This is one of my favorite things because I can still remember the wonder I felt during my first time in a NICU. I love to share what I know with the students and to explain about working with such tiny human beings. When I had been on the unit for about seven or eight months, I had a nursing student with me who asked me how many years I had been working there. When I told her how long it really had been, she was shocked. This is

### FIRST YEAR TIPS

1. Make sure that the job you are starting is a right fit for you. If you go to work day after day and are unhappy, then you should move to a different area. There is no shame in moving so that you can find a position that is the right fit for you.

2. Know where your resources are on the unit, but do not be afraid to ask questions. There are never dumb questions, especially where patients and their safety are concerned.

3. Look back at your nursing books to refresh your memory about the specific areas and conditions you may be working with. It will help you refamiliarize yourself with the information you may have learned two or three years ago and is not as fresh in your mind.

4. Make a point to get to know the healthcare providers with whom you will be working. It will definitely make your job easier to have established rapport with them early on.

5. You worked very hard for your nursing license, so do not let yourself be put in any situation that could possibly jeopardize it.

6. Remember that sometimes you will need to step a little outside of your comfort zone and allow yourself to build up your confidence with harder skills or patients. When you do this, always have a person that you can call upon with questions or if things get overwhelming.

7. To get to know your coworkers, join in on some of the functions that are held outside of work, away from all the hustle and bustle of the unit.
While I was writing this article, I asked some of my fellow nurses how they feel their first year has gone.

“The first year is always the hardest. You are unsure of your abilities as a nurse, because you do not have an instructor looking over your shoulder telling you what to do. You have to be able to think on your feet and in some cases, use your imagination. You really have to learn to be confident in your abilities and know that college prepared you as much as possible for the ‘real world.’ Working is very different, but it is what I have wanted to do for as long as I can remember and it is what I will continue to do.”

—Katy, emergency room nurse in Milwaukee

“I started out as a nurse in the float pool going to different areas and meeting new people. At first it was a great way to gain experience and see many of the different units and different types of nursing. I very much enjoyed each unit in its own way, but quickly realized that working in the pediatric/neonatal ICU was my calling and my passion. To know that I am part of the reason that these children are still alive is amazing and makes being a nurse worth all the hard work. I wouldn’t trade my job for anything and I hope to be doing it for many years to come.”

—Renae, western Wisconsin

Transition Complete

While I looked forward to the transition from student nurse to registered nurse, I never fully understood what an awe inspiring job being a nurse would be. I’ve gone from saying, “I will go and get your nurse for you,” to being that nurse. I truly learned the meaning of compassionate care and how much you can touch patients and their families without even realizing it. I have learned what an awesome thing it is to be part of a team of nurses and staff who provides care 24/7 for some of the sickest babies in the city.

The journey to officially joining the nursing profession is a personal one for each and every nursing student. What I have learned this year is that nursing is my true calling and I will always be a nurse no matter where life may lead me. In school you can sometimes lose sight of why you are truly there, but the end result is worth all the work. You cannot truly understand what the end result will be like until you are able to experience it in your first year in nursing. Remember that nursing should not be something that you work hard at to love, but something that you love to work hard at. 😊

Jennifer R. Tucker, BSN, RN, served on the 2005-2006 board of directors and currently works in a Minneapolis hospital.