Carmen Barnwell TIM FRASER

Michael Johnson TIM FRASER

Ellen Bekoe TIM FRASER

The faces of healthcare in Ontario

Carmen

It's 11:00 p.m. and her shift just started, but Carmen Barnwell, a Personal Support Worker (PSW), knows it's not the time you put in, but the care you give. Like the other 55,000 SEIU Healthcare members, Barnwell is the heart of healthcare.

SEIU Healthcare, Canada's healthcare union, has been standing up for healthcare workers since 1944, but today sees itself as a union for the 21st century. Adding to its repertoire of standard union servicing, such as collective bargaining and other labour relations activities, innovative, out-of-the-box political activism, policy work, education, advocacy and public awareness are now part of the tool box.

Barnwell is a VON Peel homecare PSW, meaning she works in clients' homes to assist individuals with physical disabilities, mental impairments and other health care needs, with their daily activities and providing bedside care. Although she loves the work and feels it is important to help her clients live as independently as possible, it is not an easy career choice. The job is physically, mentally and emotionally demanding and, generally speaking, not very lucrative financially.

Barnwell has been a PSW for the last 20 years and made this her second career after working in accounting because she is a "people" person and wanted to do something that was more fulfilling. "It's a rewarding vocation. Giving back to the community, contributing to my future; I'm paying it forward — it's a legacy for my children and grandchildren as well as for when I need it in the future," she says.

It makes sense that this need to help others and serve the greater good would have led her to the union. "I voted for fairness, respect and a united voice. As most homecare PSWs work in isolation and most of us travel from client home to home, we don't have the opportunity to speak to each other or our employer about issues we face," she says.

Last year, SEIU Healthcare championed a wage increase for Ontario's PSWs that will be rolled out in three phases until 2016. What did this wage improvement mean to Barnwell and others like her? "It was a victory for us all. Without a living wage, we work at a loss when you consider we have to pay for a vehicle to get to clients' homes and pay other expenses out of pocket. You go into debt or need to have multiple jobs. Ultimately, clients get less service because of tired PSWs.

"PSW jobs are always in demand but young people don't want to stay in this profession because of the wages. Without more money, they will move onto higher paying professions," she adds.

Looking forward and with an aging population explosion, Barnwell hopes to see more money earmarked for healthcare and the people who are at the heart of it.

Michael

Michael Johnson has worked at Mount Sinai Hospital for almost 15 years as a Support Service Transporter. Previously part-time, Johnson recently went full-time and was also elected a steward for his unit.

"I got involved because as a part-timer, it was important to me to be the voice of other part-timers who may not have been comfortable bringing their concerns to management. Stewards just have to try their best to be the voice of reason. If you don't have representation, you are lost," Johnson says. "If you are interested in making a difference, there are many channels within the union."

"When I participate in one of SEIU Healthcare's events like the annual picnic or the Labour Day Parade, I feel proud to be part of one big unit with a common goal."

Ellen

Generating member engagement is a challenging task for any union, but not in the case of Ellen Bekoe, Registered Practical Nurse (RPN) from Parkview Nursing Centre Hamilton.

In fact, just try to keep this millennial go-getter away from the action. She's been involved in numerous political campaigns and elections, community and workplace events, conferences and conventions and has sat on several union committees.

"People think the union does nothing for them and just takes their dues, so I wanted to find out for myself and that's when I got involved," Bekoe says. "I found out the union does all kinds of other things for its members in addition to helping us get better benefits and wages. I was able to get my professional liability insurance for free through the union and since volunteering on the Obama campaign in 2012, I've discovered that the union's political activism and stand for social justice helps shape the modern workplace."

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As an RPN, Bekoe derives great satisfaction from her work. Inspired by her mother-in-law, a nurse from Ghana, she was touched by her experiences with her patients. "Some days she would come home saddened by the death of a patient and other days she'd come home so excited because of the progress of her patients," she said. "Nursing is a good, caring profession and I wanted to be part of that."

This is frequently the sentiment people in healthcare express; a need to help and show compassion for others. But for Bekoe, that feeling doesn't end there — it is her desire to make the world a better place that inspires so much of her union activities. "It makes me a better person and I am able to share what I learn with my co-workers. My voice has power and although once very shy, I'm not afraid to speak up and share my knowledge."

SEIU Healthcare members are an intrinsic piece of the healthcare system and our need for them is ever-increasing. Together, we are with you every step of the way.