

I am a Yale Nurse: Tae-Wol Stanley '97



Tae-Wol Stanley '97, knows how Hollywood would depict his career. It would show him working tirelessly in an urban health clinic in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco. One day, a man would stagger in, sick, starving and only semi-coherent. Stanley, seeing a flicker of something special in the man, would patiently nurse him back to health.

Sure, there would be some obstacles and setbacks, but in the Capra-esque final scene, we'd see the patient, now a handsome and robust member of society, giving his wife and new baby a jaunty wave as he left for his new job as director of a drug treatment program—in the Tenderloin district. “In real life it doesn't happen that way,” says Stanley, who works in the Housing and Urban Health division of the San Francisco Department of Public Health. “I can't tell one of those stories. The reality of the work I do is that for the most part, my patients seem to get worse.”

That doesn't mean his work isn't important or that Stanley isn't good at it. In fact, Stanley would tell you there are success stories. They may be a little more subtle. For example, Stanley did have one of those clients who stumbled into the clinic, alcoholic, schizophrenic, filled with rage and crawling with lice.

“It was like something biblical,” he recalled, “but we got him on anti-psychotics and he joined the human race.” Just when it seemed as though the man had turned his life around and Hollywood might come knocking, the man found out he had terminal lung cancer. The patient, who lived in one of the single-room-occupancy hotels the city provides for the homeless, chose to end his days, with the help of his health care providers, at the hotel. “We couldn't find any family members. All he had was our care,” Stanley says. “It was an incredible thing to provide somebody.”

A lot of the problems Stanley's patients face, such as drug addiction or mental illness, seem intractable but there are still things Stanley does that make a difference. “Like showing them how to take care of an infection,” he says. “That might seem like a minor thing, but it can be a big help.”

Stanley moved to the United States from Korea when he was six years old. His mother is Korean and his father is American. “I’m Eurasian, so I was different wherever I went,” he says. “Maybe that’s part of why I identify with the marginalized. I was brought up with a strong sense of social justice.”

Stanley, who got his undergraduate degree from SUNY Buffalo, went to San Francisco after college to pursue a PhD in anthropology. He thought he wanted to be an academic or a documentary film maker, but somewhere along the line he realized he was drawn to teaching because he wanted to be with people and help them, not because he liked teaching. He started volunteering once a week, giving massages to HIV patients. This brought him into contact with a variety of health care professionals, which eventually led to his decision to become a nurse practitioner.

Yale turned out to be the ideal environment in which to pursue his interest in providing health to the indigent and alienated. He volunteered at a downtown soup kitchen and at a women’s shelter. During his last two years at YSN, he was involved in community health care, treating a predominantly poor, Spanish-speaking population in Meriden. “Whatever walked in the door you had to deal with,” he says. “That was really helpful to me in terms of figuring out what my interests were.” His classmates at Yale played a role in that as well. “What I loved about Yale, what made it so great, was how bright and diverse the students were,” he says. “Everyone is there because they want to be there; it’s not just preparation to go out and earn a paycheck. They’ve all gone off to different, great things.”

Stanley’s “great thing” is working with homeless people to get them into supportive housing and then arranging for medical care, social work and substance abuse treatment. The clients are placed in special single-room-occupancy hotels. They pay a third of whatever income they have for rent, and they must live by certain rules. Stanley’s

role in this effort is wide-ranging. One day he works in the clinic, and patients come to him. Another day he’ll go to another site to treat undocumented migrant workers. He also spends time at a needle-exchange clinic, makes house calls to the hotels where the formerly homeless live and trains patients in the use of Narcan, an antidote for a heroin overdose.

The clinic has a close-knit staff of nurses, nurse practitioners, internists, doctors and psychiatrists, but Stanley describes it as predominantly a nurse practitioner-run clinic. “Our expertise and abilities are cherished,” he says. “I don’t think I could be any more effective being a doctor. The nurse practitioner role is perfectly suited for this kind of environment, which is not unlike a rural environment in the shortage of services our patients face. We’re like a country practice in the city.”

The tourists, who accidentally wander into the Tenderloin district on their way to their hotel or to the cable cars, may not quite understand, but

Stanley also really enjoys his clients. “I just find them more interesting,” he says. “At the end of the day, I feel more accomplished working with people who don’t have the means to help themselves. It’s more interesting to me than research or working for a big HMO.”

Despite the warm feelings Stanley now has toward his patients, he knows burnout is one of the hazards of his job. He tries to stave it off by celebrating the small victories. “Sometimes one of our patients does get clean. They pass by crack dealers every day and still they stay clean. It’s pretty remarkable,” he says, adding that he finds “a lot more grace in that” than in the Hollywood version.

As he considers his career, Stanley says he can see himself moving in a different direction some day, but it will always be in the same realm and as a nurse practitioner. “It’s just very exciting,” he says. “There’s a certain connection I have with these folks that I appreciate.”



Tae-wol Stanley with his mother. He says, “She’s behind my work one hundred percent! She inspires me without fail and loves to visit San Francisco as much as she can.”



Tae-wol with his partner Jeffrey Ralph, MD on a bike ride to defeat ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig’s Disease).