

The real face of Nursing

A small Melbourne film company has produced a compelling TV series that reveals the warts and all experiences of nurses. By SARAH MARINOS

The woman was dying of cancer. During the night in the hospital ward in Melbourne she began choking. Fluid collected in her chest making it harder to draw each breath. Her family stood by her bedside for as long as they could and then took refuge in the tearoom along the hallway. They were too distraught to watch the woman they loved struggling to survive.

Nicholas Bird was on duty that night. He was a registered nurse in the cardio-thoracic ward of a private hospital and often patients from the cancer unit were transferred to his ward during the holiday season.

“That woman was dying and all I could do to make her feel better was hold her hand,” Bird recalls.

“Her family was obviously grief-stricken and emotional and when they left her for a while, I asked her what I could do to help. She said, ‘just sit and hold my hand for 10 minutes.’ So I did that, and it was a very profound moment for me as a nurse. I realised I couldn’t do anything to save her life but I could spend some time with her.”

“I think moments like that are unfortunately rare in nursing. I usually had five or six patients to care for on each shift and most of them had suffered heart attacks and had heart bypass surgery. I had to sort out their hygiene needs, give them medication at set times, listen to their chest and monitor their heart rhythm, organise X-rays on certain days, talk to their family, make sure my patients weren’t in heart failure and look after their personal needs, too.”



Bird & Nurse TV's producer Eleanor Sharpe on location at Liverpool Hospital.

“Nursing is very complex and varied but I don’t think people outside the industry have much of an idea of what nurses do. So much about nursing is unknown and unappreciated.”

Bird is hoping to lift the veil of secrecy and ignorance around nursing with a new series called Nurse TV - the first documentary series in Australia about nursing. He left the profession after five years and has since forged a career as an independent filmmaker. He’s produced and directed documentaries on everything from the Midsumma Festival and air travel safety to Victoria Police’s efforts at reducing drug abuse and drug-related crimes - but nursing is his passion.

So much so, that Bird, 35, has put thousands of dollars of his own money into Nurse TV to ensure it gets to air. At the moment he’s \$80,000 out of pocket unless he finds sponsors fast. The series has just started screening on Foxtel’s Aurora Channel and Bird is determined to see the project through, no matter how much it costs him.

“The financial situation is stressful. Each show is produced on a shoestring but we use a camera worth \$100,000 and it costs us at least \$2,000 a day to shoot. Money is a worry but so many people have given me their time. They’ve shared their stories with me and those stories are important,” Bird says determinedly.

“Rain or shine the program will be made.”

Bird’s company, Waterbyrd Filmz, is in Collingwood and the terraced property is crammed with documents, video tapes, DVDs, cameras and editing equipment. Bird and his business partner, Eleanor Sharpe, spend long hours here every day sifting through hours of Nurse TV footage and searching for the shots that will sum up a story and reflect the diverse nature of nursing.