

## **Planting Seeds, One Patient at a Time**

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Waking up with the sun still below the horizon and the birds still fast asleep in their nests, thousands of workers are on their way to clock in at their local hospital. Whether it be ICU nurses, surgeons, psychologists, or even the janitors, there are numerous jobs that go unnoticed and underappreciated within a hospital.

Many of those jobs reside in the impatient behavioral health unit – more commonly known as the psych ward. From the security guards to the nurses to the social workers, the individuals who dedicate their time and effort into those who severely struggle mentally should never go unnoticed.

Hannah Rodri is a 22-year-old grad student working full time as a social worker at the impatient behavioral health unit, while also managing her time as a full-time student completing her master's degree in the field of social work. For what started as a simple internship to complete her undergrad credits, Rodri has learned to fall in love with the intricate work that finds her throughout this job.

Her day begins with receiving her case load, which typically has anywhere between eight to 12 patients. Throughout her 10-hour shift, Rodri must go meet with each patient, attend family group sessions, and track any progress or lack thereof in the patient's paperwork. Sometimes, her tasks might be interrupted with codes alerting throughout the wing and hospital, forcing her to stop her work and go help her coworkers with whatever they might need.

“My day looks different every day,” said Rodri.

The work of a social worker may look different to every patient. At times, Rodri is there to just be an open ear, while other times she's entrusted to make daily or weekly plans for each of her patients.

As she finishes her second – sometimes third – energy drink of the day, Rodri finds herself finishing up her notes and clocking out of the hospital. Driving home trying to decompress from her shift, Rodri is welcomed home with home cooked soup from her roommate, Karrin Chandler, and three assignments that are due at midnight for her grad program.

“Sometimes she comes home just kind of, like, exhausted,” said Chandler. “I have to kind of let her do her thing for a little bit. I have to let her decompress and then I can come annoy and bother her.”

Finding the balance between being a full-time student with a full-time job is no easy feat for anybody, but it can become especially hard when you walk through your own front door still carrying the hardships and stress that your patients carry everyday.

“It’s exhausting, and you give up a lot of yourself for not a lot of reward,” said Rodri. “It can be really rewarding at times, but it’s not always gonna feel like it.”

Trying to find different ways to leave your work at the front door can be immensely challenging, but if there’s even a small crack in your personal foundation it can become so much easier to let everything around you crumble.

“You gotta practice what you preach,” said Chandler. “Like you should have a therapist, you should be taking care of your mental health and your physical health, especially if you’re going to encourage patients to do the same thing.”

After a full year of working with her patients, Rodri has been able to see the true, tangible change that can occur due to her persistent and dedicated work. One of her patients recently moved to Alaska to be closer to his family after suffering from severe depression and anxiety. After reaching out to the patient’s family, Rodri and her team decided it would be best to move him out of state and provide him with local resources, so that he could spend his days with his grandkids and children. Once the patient was settled in his new home, Rodri had received an email from his family expressing that they had never seen their father more happy and full of joy before.

“I was able to make real tangible change with people independently,” said Rodri. “It’s so impactful to advocate for people who aren’t able to do it for themselves or don’t know that the possibility’s there.”

Those who may be admitted into the inpatient behavioral health unit may struggle with various disorders and illnesses, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, severe depression, PTSD, eating disorders, and so much more. Although some of these patients might have received their disorders through genetics, many suffer simply because nobody was there for them when they needed it the most.

“A lot of people didn’t get a lot of patience or kindness growing up and that kind of ends up leading to these kinds of situations,” said Rodri. “Sometimes it’s just beneficial to even have one person to listen to you.”

Growing up in Durango, Colorado, Rodri was faced with a number of her friends overdosing or struggling to find real resources within the community – sparking her passion for social work.

Throughout the majority of high school, Rodri found herself being that shoulder for her friends to cry on and pushing them to be the best versions of themselves. With this experience already under her belt, the transition to social work in a college setting wasn't too different. The biggest difference? The number of individuals who would seek out Rodri's care.

In her position, Rodri has discovered that she is not responsible for saving someone's life in a day. Each one of her patients has a unique story that requires patience and trust to fully understand. At times, it might be frustrating to see no real progress, but often, the progress isn't tangible.

"These problems that have been becoming larger and larger throughout (my patient's) lives are not my fault," said Rodri. "I'm not going to be able to fix anything in the short period of time that I work with them."

By taking each day, hour by hour, minute by minute, Rodri has been able to not only save herself with a true passion, but save those that she works so hard for. Impatient behavioral health units may often get a bad reputation, but what many fail to understand is that the core of humanity lives within those walls. Kindness and patience for each other can lift one up from the darkest depths.

"You're not gonna be able to fix a problem that's been going on for 25 years in 25 minutes," said Rodri. "You plant seeds, you don't give answers."