

PUT ME IN COACH!

Building your pharmacy team by expanding roles

by Chris Linville

Sirena Kalinski began her pharmacy career in high school as a cashier. In 1998 she received her Washington state pharmacy technician license before beginning her independent pharmacy career in 2002 with Duvall Family Drugs in Duvall, Wash. As a technician her responsibilities included a variety of roles in the pharmacy.

Sirena says she enjoyed what she was doing but wasn't necessarily passionate about it.

"I did a good job, and I loved it, but I was definitely just showing up and doing my job and going home every day," she says. "I clocked in and clocked out."

In 2018, pharmacy owner Kari VanderHouwen approached Sirena to let her know about plans to purchase a second location, and she needed someone to run the anchor store.

"She was looking for someone who embodied the heart and soul of Duvall Family Drug, and that was me, a technician, not necessarily a pharmacist," Sirena says. "She took me under her wing. We made the director of pharmacy operations role an official title in 2018, and I became Sirena Kalinski, the director of pharmacy operations at Duvall Family Drug. For me it's been an incredible transformation in going from a technician to a leadership role."





SIRENA KALINSKI, CPHT

DUVALL
Duvall Family Drugs
WASH.

DIRECTOR OF PHARMACY OPERATIONS
 PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITIES: MONITOR AND OVERSEE VARIOUS ASPECTS OF PHARMACY OPERATIONS AT DUVALL FAMILY DRUGS. SERVE AS THE PRIMARY PHARMACY OPERATIONS LEAD AND IS RESPONSIBLE FOR PROVIDING KEY LEADERSHIP DIRECTION, ORGANIZATION, MANAGEMENT, MONITORING AND COMPLIANCE OF THE ROLES, ACTIVITIES, AND PROCEEDINGS TO ENSURE SAFE, COST EFFECTIVE AND TIMELY PROCESSING OF ALL MATTER WITHIN THE PHARMACY.

MAKING THE MOVE

Sirena, along with **Meredith “Meredy” Ayers**, and **Amber Suthers**, shared their stories for the NCPA CE webinar “Put Me in, Coach! Building your Pharmacy Team.” They describe how they, as pharmacy team members who are specialists in areas such as medical billing, clinical service implementation and leadership, made the jump from technician to larger roles, and its effect on them both personally and professionally. The full webinar is available in the NCPA webinar library at ncpa.thinkingcap.com/webinars.

Meredy is administrative coordinator at Breomo Pharmacy in Richmond, Va. She says her career began as a clerk at a small-town pharmacy in Virginia when she was in high school. That experience made her fall in love with the community aspect of independent pharmacy, eventually leading her to Breomo Pharmacy in 2014.

“I’ve settled into the administrative coordinator position, which by definition is a catch-all,”



AMBER SUTHERS, CPHT

SURGOINSVILLE
Surgoinsville Pharmacy
TENN.

CLINICAL PRACTICE MANAGER
 PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITIES: RESEARCH AND IMPLEMENT NEEDED SERVICES FOR THE COMMUNITY, MANAGE ALL BUSINESS FUNCTIONS RELEVANT TO THE BUSINESS, INCLUDING INSURANCE PROVIDER CREDENTIALING; MEDICAL BILLING AND PATIENT ACCOUNT RECONCILIATION, MAINTAIN EDUCATION ACCREDITATION STANDARDS AND POLICIES AND PROCEDURES FOR PROGRAMS, ASSIST WITH MONTHLY ACCOUNTING AND TAXES, AND CREATE, ADMINISTER, AND REPORT ON CLINICAL PROGRAMS.

“I love where I am right now, and I just want to be able to continue to invest in pharmacy and to make sure we can sustain the things that we are doing and grow.”

– Amber Suthers, CPHT

she says. "I'm a logistics person in that role, I do a lot of reconciliation of durable medication equipment and vaccine billing, especially with COVID-19 vaccines, and making sure everything was paid for and everyone was taken care of, and that safety protocols are in place, while at the same time doing things under my job description."

Amber, who serves as clinical practice manager at Surgoinsville Pharmacy in Surgoinsville, Tenn., began her independent pharmacy career in 2005 at age 16 as a cashier. After graduating from high school, Amber attended community college and completed the pharmacy technician program and clinical training rotation in 2007. She then continued her academic career and obtained her bachelor's degree in radiography and worked in an orthopedic office for five years. Amber finished her master's thesis in 2016 and graduated with her master's degree in allied health in 2017.

Amber says that in 2015 Surgoinsville Pharmacy owner Beth Bryan reached out to her and asked if she would ever consider coming back into pharmacy. By this time, she had a working knowledge of physician office workflow, metric requirements, and medical billing.

"I thought about it and told her I wasn't really interested in the production part anymore," she says. "I was initially brought in as an adherence technician to work on our EQUIPP scores and try to find new ways for us to make money. The first year that I was there we went out to all of the industries nearby and we have been doing their flu clinic vaccinations since then."

Amber says Surgoinsville Pharmacy also did a lot of COVID employee testing and provided help with insurance issues.

"At one point a company had a big issue with insurance because another company bought them out, so we helped their patients get through the month of COBRA coverage when all of the paperwork didn't go through," she says. "We really forged those relationships in the community, so that's basically how I got to where I am now. I coordinated and implemented our COVID testing program, our clinics that we set up, physician collaboration, medical billing, vaccine coordination, all of those different things, as well as some of the business management aspects of running a pharmacy."

MORE THAN JUST FILLING PILLS

Sirena says Kari considers Duvall Family Drugs as "her baby and her heart and soul." With that in mind, Sirena says it was important that her transition into an executive role be done right and in the proper manner.

"We found that taking that technician and putting that person in a leadership role, it's not a lateral move, it's not just something you step into one day," Sirena says. "There was a lot of thought process that went into this."

Sirena says that when an owner is considering promoting a staff person to a larger position, it's critical to give that person the means to succeed.

"It's not just a title that you give somebody; it needs to be done the right way," she says. "I went and took some college classes in leadership. I did some education and did some learning and personal growth before this was an official title that was given to me. It's important to get those skills, because in school you're not really taught these things, whether it be a pharmacist or technician or cashier or whatever team member it is that we're talking about. Make sure you

Show me the way

Meredy Ayers, administrative coordinator at Brema Pharmacy Richmond, Va., has been featured, along with Brema pharmacist Tana N. Kaefer, PharmD, as a coach in the NCPA Innovation Center's "Show Me" video series, sponsored by Pfizer. This season's episodes focus on immunizations, with Meredy and Tana on site at pharmacies providing staff with ways to maximize the use of their technicians and make the most of each patient interaction. All episodes are available on NCPA's YouTube channel www.youtube.com/user/NCPAvids.



give those tools that person needs to do what you want them to do. It's very important."

Amber says her duties include being a facilitator for CPESN® USA networks in Tennessee. "I work on those projects and make sure I am implementing them correctly in our store. I've worked on all the Flip the Pharmacy work groups, so it's been a long journey to get here, but I love where I am right now, and I just want to be able to continue to invest in pharmacy and to make sure we can sustain the things that we are doing and grow."

Amber says the pharmacy has a small staff but points out that Beth as owner "has a great vision and wants to see changes in our commu-

nity. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be where I am right now. She's let me grow in the areas where I am strong. That takes a lot of trust, and the communication is key and forming that trust with your staff is huge."

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

For pharmacy team members seeking to advance, Meredy offers some advice.

"I look at it as growing within a company. Are they going to allow you to grow, or do you need to move on?" she says. "I had a great conversation with a technician recently who felt like she had maxed out where she was in her position. My go-to line was asking her to do a 'brain dump.' Empty the contents of your brain on to the table, sort it out and do

an old-fashioned pro-and-con list."

Meredy advised the technician to create a wish list of things she would like to do and present it as a plan to the owner.

"At that point the position forms itself, but you also have to realize the pharmacy owner might not be in that same mindset, at least immediately, so you have to be prepared to state your case," she says. "But that brain dump can help create the job."

Sirena says her role came about naturally.

"I wasn't looking for the role; it was something that was organic," she says. "Sometimes I think that as a pharmacist or an owner, you find



MEREDITH "MEREDY" AYERS, CPHT

RICHMOND
Brevo Pharmacy
VA.

ADMINISTRATIVE COORDINATOR
PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITIES: DUTIES INCLUDE SUBMISSION AND RECONCILIATION OF DME AND VACCINE MEDICAL BILLING; MARKETING AND SOCIAL MEDIA; INSTRUCTION FOR IN-PERSON SIMULATIONS FOR THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF HEALTH-SYSTEM PHARMACISTS; COORDINATION OF BREVO PHARMACY'S 32-HOUR MEDICATION MANAGEMENT COURSE; OVERALL STAFF ASSISTANCE AND LOGISTICS.

"The key thing is to communicate with your staff to find out what they want. Realize what their strengths are and make sure you are on the same page. It's important to grow your technicians."

- Meredith "Meredy" Ayers, CPHT

“For me it’s been an incredible transformation in going from a technician to a leadership role.”

– Sirena Kalinski, CPHT

yourself overwhelmed with what you’re trying to get done. So, you look toward your team members for support. That’s what we’re here for. We’re pharmacy support staff, right?”

FINDING BALANCE

Even as their roles expanded, Amber, Meredy and Sirena say that they enjoy getting back to their roots and putting on their technician’s hat when needed. It’s all about being prepared and anticipating the daily workload.

“Planning and scheduling is important,” Amber says. “If it’s a slow day, maybe you can do more administrative work. If it’s busy, schedule a certain number of hours per day to make sure the desk work is done.”

Meredy agrees, saying “Scheduling is huge.” She says some owners are reluctant to pull technicians away from the counter because they are so good at what they do in that role.

“I don’t want to move those people. They are the ones making my pharmacy run,” is a common sentiment Meredy hears.

Her response? “If you don’t lose them off the counter and there isn’t something they can grow into, you are going to lose them entirely. That’s where communication and scheduling come in, so there’s a balance between your operation on the front end and your operation on the back end.”

Sirena echoes those sentiments. “Some people say they don’t want to lose their technicians to leadership roles because techs are hard to come by,” she says. “But you are not losing a technician. Kari did not lose me as a technician, she gained me as a leader in the pharmacy. Recently we had a technician out with COVID and another was on vacation, so I became the lead technician. So, you aren’t losing a technician, you are just simply adding to what they are already doing.”

MENTORING

Meredy says she embraces being a mentor for technicians who might want a bigger role.

“What they are doing is important, but they have decided they want to expand a little bit,” she says. “As fortunate as I was to have pharmacists as my mentor, I did not have a technician in that role, so I decided I wanted to be that person for other technicians. I’ve had some great conversations with technicians and co-workers at our company. The key thing is to communicate with your staff to find out what they want. Realize what their strengths are and make sure you are on the same page. It’s important to grow your technicians.”

As Sirena says, “We are not just technicians. We are so much more.” ■

Chris Linville is managing editor of America’s Pharmacist®.

