

Despite Long Commute, Nursing Student Driven to Graduate

It's still dark outside when Crystal Winans slips into her hybrid car and turns on the engine. She rolls out of a quiet road, past shadows still asleep, heading west toward Charlotte down a two-lane highway. A chicken processing plant passes. Then the Uwharrie National Forest.

"I've hit a deer twice. But it's pretty," she says.

In the time one could drive from Charlotte to Atlanta, Winans has commuted from her home outside of Fort Bragg to center-city Charlotte – totaling 4.5 hours roundtrip – to earn her RN degree at Carolinas College of Health Sciences (CCHS) for the past two years.

Rather than grouse about leaving the house before dawn and getting home at 10:30 p.m. on clinical days, Winans' outlook is completely glass-half-full. She's taken the opportunity to tutor students after school, set up Skype tutoring sessions for extended instructing, made good friends and passed time wisely during her commutes.

And even before she graduates from CCHS on Dec. 18, the hard work and long hours will have paid off – she has a job lined up at the cardio thoracic ICU at Duke University Health System. She begins in February after she gets licensed.

CCHS wasn't always in Winans' line of sight. She began her career as a grant writer for non-profits, but sought a more hands-on job to help people. Nursing was her first choice. After her husband's military job moved the couple abruptly from Colorado to North Carolina in January 2014, though, Winans had missed the deadlines for most nursing schools.

She had only two options: wait eight months for the next round of applications to open at nearby schools, or commute to CCHS three to four days a week – but be able to start school in January. She cheerfully chose the latter.

"I'm glad I decided to come here," Winans, 31, says. "I thought hard before choosing CCHS, but it was my choice not to wait and put off school."

She started listening to audiobooks on the long drives, and estimates she's completed 50. One of her favorites was "Unbroken," a story of a POW during WWII. She also began recording the lectures, listening to them in the car. "I don't think I would have done that had I not had a captive audience in the car," she jokes.

Her favorite aspect of nursing school at CCHS has been the clinical coursework and the preceptorships. Winans worked directly with nurses in their daily routines, and values the one-on-one opportunities that come with a smaller school. "I know it helps our students an amazing amount having us tied to Carolinas HealthCare System," she adds. "Several students have jobs through the System now. You're able to meet so many people on the floor."

Winans says she's not the only one of her classmates to commute. People come from South Carolina and other areas around western North Carolina to earn degrees at CCHS, and unsurprisingly, she says her biggest challenge has been finding time to study.



But as school and the drives to Charlotte wrap up with graduation on Dec. 18, Winans says she has no regrets. "I'm incredibly glad to get it done when I did. It's been a great experience here and I got a great education. I wish I had changed to nursing earlier."

Not that she's done piling miles on her car. Duke is 75 minutes away from her current home in the Whispering Pines/Carthage area.

"We're considering moving a little closer to Durham."