

by ciara sayler and hannah moran

Two nights a week, senior Bret Watson gets out of school at 9:15 p.m. Watson, along with 14 other juniors and seniors, attends classes on Tuesday and Thursday nights in hopes of one day becoming a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA).

An integral part of today's healthcare system, a CNA is responsible for taking vital signs, responding to patients in critical condition and bathing patients. A nationwide demand for CNAs allows them the flexibility to work in nursing homes, hospitals or rehabilitation centers.

Patrick Kelly, district director of career and technical education, contacted local junior colleges to see if they were interested in bringing CNA classes to the district.

When program sponsor Jane Rock heard of the possibility of a CNA class, she immediately emailed the parents of everyone who had completed Pre-Med I, II and a Health Career Internship.

Watson knew she was interested in a nursing career, so after a talk with her mother--a nurse at Lawrence Memorial Hospital--she decided to participate in the program.

"We decided that having this on a college application this early will hopefully give me a better chance at getting into nursing school," she said.

Fourteen other students made the same decision as Watson, and after filling out the requisite information sheet, sat through the first four hour 15 minute long class on Sept. 3. Sponsored by Neosho County Community College, the program consists of mostly lecture interspersed with mini-lab simulations.

"Last week we were learning about being elderly," Watson said. "So we put on gloves and fogged up goggles and [put] cotton in our ears to simulate the dull senses of someone who would be living in a long-term care facility."

Beginning in October, the CNA trainees start clinical rotations at Pioneer Ridge Health Center. Every weekend, the trainees will each spend six hours making beds, giving baths and checking vital signs. Watson is excited to work with the elderly.

"I think they're absolutely the cutest things in the world," she said. "I really connect with them. Some people underestimate them, but I like hearing their stories. They're cool to hang out with."

After attending lectures and performing clinicals for three months, the CNA trainees will complete an exit skills test to ensure they can perform all the necessary patient care tasks.

Then, they will board a bus to a testing center in Topeka where they will complete the state exam, which ultimately decides whether or not the students become certified.

Senior Joanna Lepley is already a CNA. She attended classes this summer through Washburn Institute of Technology. The classes, held two days a week for two hours each day, were hosted in Rock's classroom.

"There were little problems getting here," Lepley said, "you know, the door stayed locked sometimes. We would be waiting outside in the heat,...but that was ok."

Lepley, along with other students from Lawrence High, received her CNA certification on Aug. 9.

Watson and her classmates, the new cycle of CNA trainees, will soon catch up to Lepley, as they are scheduled to receive their certifications at the beginning of December.

The rewards for becoming a CNA can be numerous.

"[After I get my CNA,] I can probably get a job at Brandon Woods or any of the other assisted living homes," Watson said. "Those pay like \$9-\$10 an hour which is a lot better than what I'm making right now."

Although the state of Kansas offers students the potential to get hired as a CNA, some employers see barriers.

"Some will say that 16-year-olds are too immature," Rock said.

Watson's participation in the program cost her parents about \$342 out-of-pocket, according to Rock. However, if Watson is successful in obtaining her certification, the Lawrence School District will

reimburse her family.

As far as life after high school goes, Watson plans to pursue her nursing career.

“I’m looking at KU and Arkansas [because] I want to be a nurse anesthetist,” Watson said. “That’s the person who helps give the medicine to the patients and knock them out.”

Although Lepley has slightly different plans from Watson, she also aspires to pursue nursing.

“I’m thinking about going to Johnson County to get my pre-requisites out of the way,” Lepley said. “Then I’m thinking about going to Washburn to get my Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN).”