Operating Department Orderly Shirley is an Unsung Hero of the NHS

Operating Department Orderly Shirley Whitney had a glamorous and star-studded night in London as she was celebrated as one of the NHS Unsung Heroes at the ITV and Daily Mirror NHS Heroes Awards.

The Awards Ceremony - hosted by Paul O’Grady with Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall leading the tributes to the NHS unsung heroes – was recorded at the Park Lane Hilton in London for broadcast as a two-hour primetime special on 21 May on ITV.

Shirley Whitney is the heart and soul of the day surgery and endoscopy department of Breconshire War Memorial Hospital in Powys, Wales.

At the young age of 71, Shirley has already given 36 years of love to the NHS, firstly as a domestic, and for the last 20 years as operating department orderly. Fittingly, she joined the NHS on her birthday – 10 May – and her celebration trip to London was a special late birthday present.

Shirley’s role as an operating department orderly is quite unusual, as not only does she clean the perioperative environment on a daily basis, but she also supports the clinical team by transporting patients within their theatre and endoscopy journey and by assisting the qualified staff. This includes being a caring voice and helping hand for people going into theatre.

Senior nurse Cheryl Davies, who is our professional lead for surgical services here in Powys says: “As a nurse with 35 years experience myself, cleanliness is always at the top of my agenda as patients are at their most vulnerable whilst under anaesthesia. But, with Shirley in my team, I never have to worry. In fact, the environment is so clean you could eat your food off the floor! You don’t just have to take my word for it as we regularly score 100% within the external cleaning audits.
“Shirley keeps our areas clutter-free, safe, and spotlessly clean, and this is reflected in the comments we receive from our patients. The staff love Shirley and staff morale is very important as the professional lead for this service. It isn’t just her happy and welcoming attitude, but she makes sure that the whole team is working in an environment we all feel proud of – let’s be honest, a clean, uncluttered sitting area and sparkling toilets make for happy staff.”

“Shirley is kind, caring, passionate about the cleanliness within our area, and a role model for our younger staff. What a lady: 71 years young and still at the top of her game. May she stay with us for many more years.”

Shirley’s awards journey started when Cheryl nominated her for Powys Teaching Health Board’s Staff Excellence Awards. In her own words, Shirley was “gobsmacked” when she won the local award, which prompted Adrian Osborne in the Health Board’s communications team to put Shirley forward for the national awards.

When news came through from ITV that Shirley has reached the longlist for an invitation to the national awards, it was time for colleagues from theatres and the communications team to start their secret mission to get video footage and testimonials about this special lady. Everyone managed to keep the secret and then the wonderful news came through on 10 May that Shirley had reached the shortlist and was going to be invited to London.

Shirley’s emotions quickly swelled from “gobsmacked” to “well, I am a little overwhelmed” when she heard about her national award invitation – with news coming right in the middle of her shift whilst looking after local cataract patients.

Shirley’s daughter-in-law Penny Price works for Powys Teaching Health Board as a mental health nurse and was Shirley’s “plus one” for the star studded gala. She says: “Shirley is such a spring chicken. You would never know she is 71. She is so community spirited too, always looking out for her friends and family – even cooking and delivering dinner for her sister on a remote farm until she sadly passed away. And she is so passionate about her work as well. At 70 years old she could have stopped work years ago but I know that she loves being part of a team, helping patients and colleagues.”

And healthcare is clearly in the family as Shirley’s grandson Tom is now a research psychologist at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience in South London: “Nanny Shirley embodies a passion for the NHS that now spans three generations in our family.”

“Shirley is an absolute gem. We are so proud to have her as part of the team here in Powys, making such a positive difference to patients and colleagues alike”, says Julie Rowles who is Director of Workforce at Powys Teaching Health Board. “She is also a wonderful example to others by continuing to make such an amazing contribution to patient care into her 70s.”
Powys Teaching Heath Board Director Hayley Thomas adds: “Shirley Whitney is so inspiring. Thank you Shirley for your dedication to Powys and the NHS.”

Members of the health board’s theatre team had to work surreptitiously with the communications team to put together an interview with Shirley and a video of her at work to submit to the national awards team. All their secretive hard work paid off when the Awards night included the surprise announcement of three Unsung Heroes from across the UK including our very own Shirley.

Here in PTHB we are very proud of Shirley and all our other unsung heroes who work so hard for our patients and communities. Well done and thank you to everyone.