

# Actor finds new role as nursing assistant



CNAs Kendra Potter, Alex DeMelo and Cindy Garnett at Charlene Manor where they work. DeMelo, a former actor in Brazil, took a five-week training program through Greenfield Community College. Recorder/Paul Franz

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Before leaving his home in Rio de Janeiro in 1994, Alex DeMelo worked as a stage actor for 15 years and found a home in the theater.

Now, DeMelo is playing a role intimately involved in real life, as a newly minted certified nursing assistant at Charlene Manor Extended Care Facility. The path hasn't been an easy one, but DeMelo, who lives in Montague, says he can't be more grateful.

"I love people. It makes me feel good when I'm working with people," said the 51-year-old actor, former construction worker and carpenter. "There is nothing more powerful for me than this."

It was while he was on the beach at Ipanema during a 1993 visit with his brother — who'd already settled in Connecticut with other members of his family — when he heard his brother carrying on a conversation with someone in English and suddenly realized, "I don't understand a single thing that is going on. I have no money to pay my bills."

Until that moment, DeMelo said, "Rio was almost my skin. I was a stage actor, I loved it so much, it was almost a spiritual thing." But he decided he wanted to go to college, to learn English, to follow his parents and siblings to the United States.

DeMelo arrived in 1997 and began working for his family's landscaping and construction business, beginning by picking up leaves and learning carpentry. In 2004, he set up his own construction business in Danbury, Conn.

He married an American woman in 2003, they had two children and bought two houses.

"Everything was like a dream," he recalls. "It was so beautiful going up, it was so ugly going down," when the economic collapse began to wipe out his business, his houses, and even his marriage between 2004 and 2009.

"Everything went down the drain," he recalls. "I lost everything. I divorced. I almost died, I didn't know if I could survive. It was terrifying."

When his wife met someone else and decided to move to western Massachusetts with the children, she asked him if he wanted to follow them.

"They are my life," he said of his daughter, Ella, and son, Noah, now 8 and 10. "This is why I'm here."

After he moved to Montague in 2012, DeMelo found a temporary job working at a home improvement store but then got laid off.

"I stopped working, and I was 50 years old," he recalls thinking. "Now what? No [job](#). No credit. Nothing."

But he decided maybe the time was right to begin college, so he went to talk with people at Greenfield Community College, first considering the theater department. Instead, though, he took on the health sciences as a more practical path.

The cost was out of reach, said DeMelo, who was helped by the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program. But as he began talking with advisers, and also seeing newspaper ads for certified nursing assistants, he inquired at the Greenfield Career Center, where college and career navigator Sarah Wing and Assessment Counselor Carol Hayes steered him to the Skill Start and Workforce Investment Act programs to help him through a five-week Certified Nursing Assistant-Home Health Aide training at GCC.

The program has trained as many as 90 people a year since 2007, Hayes said, for a career he expects to see grow more than 19 percent in this region because of an aging population.

Within a month of getting his certificate this summer, DeMelo was looking at three possible CNA jobs in the area and took a post at Charlene Manor.

"I cannot tell you," DeMelo told a Franklin-Hampshire Career Center gathering last week, pausing several times to collect his emotions and his English. "I don't have the words to say what being a CNA means to me. I definitely love my job. I have nine — I like to call them — kids. And they let me, I ask them let me call them kids. They're around 90 years old."

The counselors at GCC and the career center, DeMelo said, guided him, “step by step, saying, ‘You can do this.’”

“I was thanking this country, I was thanking this state. I was thanking everything because I wouldn’t believe this could be possible,” he said. “This is real.”

He said, “CNA was a surprise for me,” because it connects him with people who need his help caring for them in the most basic way. “There is nothing more powerful for me. I love art, I love music, I love spirituality. Being a CNA, I’m not afraid of anything right now.”

As he finds his footing — he is still taking classes at GCC toward a health sciences degree — DeMelo plans to resume his oil painting and also pursue his love of theater, participating in a week-long winter intensive program at Ashfield’s Double Edge Theatre.

But he says that working closely with people and helping them in basic yet profound ways, has given his life a new sense of purpose.

“We don’t know what’s going to happen with us anytime,” DeMelo says. “I help people when they cannot move, I help people who have had a stroke, I help people in the Alzheimer’s disease unit ... and it can be any one of us, any one of us can be there.”

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