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## Training with virtual reality

*Web-based world helps ISU nursing students prepare*

POCATELLO — A bulletin board note aimed at getting Idaho State University nursing students excited about an innovative pilot program reads, “Won’t you be our neighbor?”

But “The Neighborhood” is far from Mr. Rogers’ carefree community. It’s a make-believe place where students follow the lives of 11 virtual families confronted with real world issues such as substance abuse and domestic violence. The program helps students understand how complex problems outside of the hospital affect patients and offers insight into care giving.

ISU is the smallest of 10 universities throughout the nation that are participating in the Pearson Health Sciences program, which nursing instructors say could be the wave of the future.

“It’s kind of like watching a soap opera unfold,” said Nancy Renn, assistant director of undergraduate studies in the department. “Some of these people develop pretty complex characters. Their problems become more complicated over time.”

The program takes four semesters to complete. Senior Trina Mallett has learned a lot about the virtual Martin family since she first logged onto the Neighborhood seven weeks ago. She reads about developments in their lives each week and views videos. Mr. Martin’s mother recently moved in against the will of his wife, Hellen, which raised the stress level in their household and exacerbated her medical problems.

Friday, Mallett and her peers prepped the virtual mother of three — an anatomically correct dummy with a cutout of Hellen’s face from the Web site — for gallbladder surgery. Dressed in clinical turquoise suits, the students simulated giving her antibiotics through an IV.

“Mrs. Martin is sick and a lot of it is stress-related,” Mallett said. “Her mother-in-law just moved in by her husband’s choice and she has taken over the kitchen and the family.”

After graduating this spring, Mallett, a former Mrs. Idaho who resides in Idaho Falls, hopes to stay in Eastern Idaho where she plans to work in acute care. She said “The Neighborhood” is providing her with useful experience. “I like it,” Mallett said. “It gives you a person and you get to see their family and what they are going through.”

The program also details the lives of the hospital staff who care for people in “The Neighborhood.” It shows the students how a caregiver’s life outside work affects what they do on the job. Some have drinking problems, others have marital difficulties. Their method of dealing with issues, or not dealing with them, impacts patient care. The program, which is being tested this year at universities including Duke, Arizona State and Cal-State Fullerton, was developed by Jean Giddens, a professor of nursing at the University of New Mexico.