C.J. Marbley is convinced the field of nursing can take people so many places in life—and in love.

Marbley, a native of Houston and a graduate of Howard University Nursing School, currently serves as chief nursing officer for New Orleans East Hospital, LCMC Health.

“My mom was an LPN, and my dad was a navy corpsman. When people asked what I wanted to do, I would say a surgeon general. I didn’t know what it was,” he said, laughing. “I went to Howard as a premed/microbiology major and worked as a nurse in a hospital to get more experience and fell in love with it.”

“I currently service a population of 90,000 to 100,000. For nine years after Katrina, there was no hospital, so people had to travel twenty to thirty minutes. This community wasn’t invested. Mayor [Mitch] Landrieu made it a point to bring health care back to the city and Mayor [LaToya] Cantrell continued with that. We see 30,000 people in emergency. Our population is 55 percent Medicaid and 20 percent Medicare. We see all the health disparities in the community—food deserts, etc.—and all the things that come from that (heart attack and strokes). Our goal is to reach out to the community as much as possible. If there is a community event that needs health services, we’re there,” said Marbley who also holds a master’s degree in business administration from Western Governor’s University.

Marbley’s journey to his current position has included a lot of interesting stops along the way, including serving as vice president of the New Orleans Black Nurses Association.

“From 2005 to 2015, I was trying to figure out what track I wanted to pursue. I decided I wanted to be a chief nursing officer... I checked all the boxes and was ready to apply to be a CNO. My CNO was about to retire, and my wife got diagnosed with terminal metastatic breast cancer and was in hospice for
four months before passing in 2015. I had three teenagers at home, and I was trying to figure out what to do. I came back to work in September...and I decided to take a sabbatical to be with my kids,” Marbley said. “I moved to New Orleans in 2016 because that’s where my first wife is from. Her dad was here by himself. He lost his first wife and daughter nine months apart.”

Marbley who had been married for 21 years eventually found a job, but the hospital for which he worked closed within six months of his arrival. Eventually, he landed a position as senior director of a children’s hospital.

“Going back to pediatrics reminded me of my love,” he said, referring to his time working while he was a student at Howard University. “It was hands-on. I got to help a lot of children from all around the state. I was there for nine months and turned the hospital around really quickly. It made such a difference that it got up to the leader of the system, and I was asked to interview,” he said of his current role.

“We work in a world of crisis management. Every day I know there is going to be a crisis. I just don’t know what the crisis is going to be. I try and prepare myself on the way to work. I say a prayer and listen to gospel music to prepare my mind. I answer emails, check in with the night supervisor. Every morning at 9 a.m., we have a meeting/safety huddle, then I meet with case management team and nursing management leaders to discuss patient concerns.”

Marbley said most of the rest of the day is spent in meetings or roundings where he goes to different nursing units and clinical units to find out how the day is going and if employees have everything they need to be successful or any patient or safety concerns. He also receives the name of staff who need to be recognized.

“It’s really getting people used to seeing executives,” he said.

It’s also important that he and other hospital leaders set the right example for his staff.

“As an executive team we try an enforce [work-life balance] by setting the example. When you’re here, be all in. When you’re home, be all in at home,” he said.
He typically works from 7:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., often riding his bike to work to get the juices flowing, then he returns home to his family, which includes his high school sweetheart whom he married in 2017 and his children who range in ages from 18 to 30. He is also a proud grandfather.

Marbley is grateful that at every stage of his life, he has found a role in nursing to fit his needs.

“You can do 100 different things in nursing...When my mom was battling lung cancer in Houston, I was able to be a traveling nurse based in Houston. When my wife was pregnant with our second child, I could become an agency nurse to make more money to offset her income. When I needed a break..., I went to school nursing for incarcerated boys in Maryland,” he said.

Despite his years of experience, there are still situations for which he isn’t prepared.

“Our census tripled in a matter of two weeks,” he said, reflecting on when the COVID pandemic hit. “Three weeks into it, we were the first hospital in Louisiana to lose a nurse to COVID. That was the hardest day of my career. We pulled as much of our staff together as possible to tell them. I turned to my CEO and told her, ‘I don’t know who is going to show up to work tomorrow.’ Many of them had family who couldn’t understand why they would return to work after someone they knew died. Some even heard, ‘You must love your job more than you love me.’ The most proud I was was the next day when everyone showed up to work.”

A year after losing ICU registered nurse Larrice Anderson, the hospital decided to give a caregivers award in her honor. They also submitted a bill for death benefits for families for nurses killed in the line of duty.

The last year has also made it abundantly clear the important roles nurses, other front line workers and the play.

“Whenever I feel like I’m at my wit’s end, I go talk to patients and families,” he said. “It reminds you of why we are doing what we’re doing. It reminds me of our mission and why we got into nursing and the difference we’re making in people’s lives. There’s a person and a family depending on us and waiting on the patient to come home and that allows you to manage whatever you’re going through.”