

NURSE IS A HOMETOWN HERO, AND NOT JUST FOR NURSING

Putting inspiration into action for those in need

WHEN COVID-19 first hit and disrupted supply chains, nurse Stacy Mason noticed that people she works with at Mary Washington Hospital began having trouble finding essential products at stores.

“A lot of nurses are parents, and you’d hear people say that they couldn’t find toilet paper, baby wipes, pull-up diapers or other items,” said Mason, an ICU nurse. “After that, when someone on the staff would see those items in the store, they’d pick them up, bring them in and leave them for people in need.

“Our ICU is a family, and in the spirit of that, we made sure that everyone had everything they needed,” she added. “After a while, we began thinking that if we could do that through just the ICU, why not create something with a broader reach for the health system as a whole, a broader example of community?”

To that end, Mason said she reached out to MWH nursing leadership, and with its blessing and help “launched a larger sort of pantry in the beginning of May, like a lending library at the Mary Washington and

**HERE &
THERE**
Rob Hedelt



Stafford hospitals.”

It worked, and spread to other Mary Washington Healthcare locations. People would bring in nonperishable food items, baby products, toiletries and more, and folks needing those items would stop by a collection point set up between the Mary Washington

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Hospital building and an adjoining parking garage.

“Our Mary Washington Hospital Team Pantry has operated with no questions asked for anyone who needs the items,” she said, “from housekeeping to nursing to whatever department they work in at the hospital. We’ve had great success operating this way, with nurses’ families, friends and business partners donating as well, some doing donation drives in offices around Fredericksburg.”

As the person who spearheaded the project, Mason is declared a Hometown Hero, though the Fauquier County resident says she’s just one of many people who have made the pantry work.

Nominating the 32-year-old Mason for the honor, Michelle Lemke with Mary Washington Healthcare credited Mason with creating the pantry after seeing fellow hospital employees struggling due to the pandemic.

“Anyone who is in need can take those items to ease their burden,” said Lemke, an assistant nurse manager. “She inspires other associates and community partners to donate to this noble cause. The mantra is, ‘Give what you can: take what you need.’”

Lemke said Mason is always thinking of ways she can help others. She helps build Easter baskets for children in need and supports the Adopt-A-Family program for children during the holidays.

“She has a servant’s heart and always does her part in taking care of ill patients in the intensive care unit, including those with COVID-19,” Lemke said.

Mason, a mother of two,

Those who want to donate items for the pantry should call Meri Jones at the hospital at 540/541-1471. To make a monetary donation, call Xavier Richardson at 540/741-1606.

said she thinks the real heroes here are the people who donate items and time to the pantry.

“When we first got it started, we went to our human resources department and submitted the idea of having staffers and others interested donate items,” said Mason. “They put something up on our hospital home page, and a flier was made and distributed suggesting items to donate. Now that summer has come, we’re seeing some fresh produce come in, items grown in people’s gardens, and that’s really neat.”

Other items that frequently show up are snacks and toiletries. The pantry often is filled with basics like soap, toothpaste and whatever people who’ve worked long shifts at the hospital don’t have time to shop for.

“There are plenty of people who come through and take advantage of the pantry who are now in single-income families because of the virus,” said Mason. “There are also others who have lost a loved one and are facing different financial realities, and staffers who aren’t working the number of hours they once did.”

Mason said friends reach out to her to suggest items for the pantry. Some show up with a monthly infusion of items from a department store, and some local business people bring in items they’ve collected in their own food drives. Others donate money.

Mason said that when

the pantry first started, she was mainly the one organizing and operating it.

“But now we have other people in the ICU and members of others teams in the hospital who are also pitching in and helping,” she said. “Seeing everyone come together to help has been one of the nicer parts of all this.”

Mason said she’s done her best to keep her family safe when she comes home. She has a vigorous sanitizing and clothes-changing protocol when she returns home from the ICU.

“There’s always some fear of coming home and either having my children getting the virus or taking it to my in-laws, and there’s always discussion of asymptomatic carriers,” she said. “I totally change clothes and shower first thing getting home. It took my children a while to understand why I didn’t hug them right away when I got home.”

Mason said the best part of dealing with the pandemic has been getting to celebrate the wins.

“When you see a patient leaving the hospital after being there with COVID, whether it’s in the ICU or a stepdown unit, and whether you were actually involved in their care, it’s very emotional,” she said. “To see someone wheeled out of the hospital after they’ve been there for over a month—some coming close to not making it out—is a very big and positive thing for us all.”

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Couple on front lines won't risk kids' safety

BY ROB HEDELT
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Anecdotal evidence suggests there are a number of local families with both parents working on the pandemic's front lines who are taking extra measures to keep their children safe.

Chelsea and Hunter Hardin, who live in Spotsylvania County, are one of those couples.

Chelsea is a nurse who's been working long shifts with COVID-19 patients in the ICU at Mary Washington and Stafford hospitals. Hunter is a manager and team leader at Wegmans who has put

in his own long hours to keep people fed and supplied.

Aside from facing the daily risk posed by the coronavirus, the couple is making another sacrifice: on March 16, they sent their daughters Coralee, 9, and Millie, 7, to live with their uncle in Culpeper County, to keep them safe.

Said Hunter: "It's really hard not to have them with us, but we had to get them safely off to the side so our family doesn't take collateral damage. With them gone, we can work and go hard and don't have to worry about putting them in danger by coming home."

For heading out each day into the front lines, and for the family sacrifice that requires, the Hardins join our list of Hometown Heroes.

In nominating the couple, Lyndsey Hinkle of Fredericksburg noted that Chelsea "has been caring for our area's COVID-19-positive patients, while Hunter is a manager at our local Wegmans and has been working overtime to keep the store safe and stocked for our area shoppers."

She said the Hardins' decision to protect their elementary school-aged

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daughters, “who they’ve not been able to see for more than a month and a half.”

“They made the difficult decision to quarantine themselves from their daughters to protect them ... They are definitely my Hometown Heroes!” she wrote.

Chelsea said that when she saw her first COVID-positive patient at Mary Washington Hospital, she knew something had to be done to keep her daughters safe. They spent a night with their local grandparents, but that wasn’t a long-term solution because the grandparents had health risks of their own.

“My wonderful brother, Jeremy Chancellor, offered to keep them and we said yes because we didn’t know what else to do,” she said. “At that time, we didn’t know it would be for so long, but he’s been great, caring for them, home-schooling them and keeping their spirits up.”

Still, it’s hard to be apart from the children you’ve been with since the day they were born.

“We do what we can, Facetime every day and hear all about their day,” she said, noting that they sent Easter baskets and spring clothes at the holiday, but had to settle for seeing how they went over via video.

Chelsea said she’s felt a lot of guilt for not being there, and doesn’t know how she’ll ever be able to repay her brother and his roommate, Stacey Rose, who’ve done everything from help with schooling to braid the girls’ hair.

“My brother’s just been amazing,” she said. “Even before we realized the classes and schoolwork would go on, he told me, ‘Chelsea, they have to keep learning. We will go on from this and they keep learning.’”

The ICU nurse, who works mainly at Mary Washington Hospital and picks up a few shifts a week at Stafford Hospital, emphasized that she and her husband realize they’re not the only ones making this sort of sacrifice for their jobs.

“A lot of nurses and other medical workers have sent their children away, to grandparents or other relatives,” she said. “It’s hard for all of us.”

She also downplays the notion she’s somehow special among her peers.

Columnist Rob Hedelt wants readers to nominate local people they feel are “Hometown Heroes” in the midst of this coronavirus. He wants to put a spotlight on people out on the front lines of this crisis—be they medical staff or the person stocking shelves in an area grocery store. And also people who are going out of their way to be kind, helpful or making a difference in this tough time.

Nominations should come via email to rhedelt@freelancestar.com or to Rob at 1340 Central Park Blvd., Suite 100, Fredericksburg, VA 22401. They need to contain the name and locality of the person doing the nominating, and the name and contact information for the person being nominated. It’s necessary to inform the nominated person before sending in a nomination.

“I’m no different than any ICU nurse. Right now all of us are working our butts off to help people,” she said. “This is just our time to show up.”

She said waves of people infected by the virus have “come and gone and come and gone,” and that it’s been difficult when patients’ lives were threatened.

“We ICU nurses always talk to our patients, and never want anyone to be alone in their last moments,” she said. “We’ve started taking phones and putting them up to patient’s ears, even those who are critically ill and sedated. At other times, we’ve started using iPads.”

She said medical workers have seen that people from all age groups have been infected—“not just 60-year-old males”—and locally have witnessed some pretty big “wins” when deathly ill patients got better.

One of the hardest adjustments has been the extra care needed in treating COVID-19 patients.

“It’s ingrained in all of us nurses to try and save people’s lives, but you can’t just run into these rooms when a patient’s pressure drops or there’s some other problem,” she said. “You have to gown up and put on all the gear. The donning and doffing of PPE is exhausting over a full shift.”

While his wife is caring for patients, Hunter is working long days trying to deal with the challenges that a contagious virus poses for a grocery store such as Wegmans.

He said the challenges have changed rapidly and the company has worked to keep all its stores safe for staff and for customers.

“They keep finding new ways to allow us to keep working,” he said, noting that it’s required all sorts of changes in the store to keep surfaces and carts clean and make sure peo-

ple socially distance.

“There’s no open food any more. All is packed and we make sure everything is covered,” he said. “We’ve got tape on the floor to guide people and ensure social distancing and Plexiglas now up at registers so customers and staffers can feel safe.”

With some items hard to get at first, such as toilet paper, he said the company worked to put limits on how many items customers could buy and find supplies from new sources or locations.

“At one point, we started getting toilet paper from Canada,” he noted. “The images that typically were on what we had sold were bears, so it was strange to see little kittens on the new deliveries. In one shipment, we got 20 pallets that were each at least 10 to 12 feet high. You could literally have made a fort out of them.”

Hunter, who grew up at Lake of the Woods in Orange County, said he misses his daughters immensely but tries to do what he can to keep Chelsea and his girls feeling upbeat.

Sometimes, that means suggesting different items and scenes that he and both his two artistically talented daughters will draw, then comparing the finished drawings virtually.

“And at other times, I try to be silly and keep things light,” he said. “If you forget for a few moments all that’s going on and get a good laugh in, it helps to be comfortable, whether you’re at work or at home.”

He closed by saying that both he and his wife are “honored to be in the positions we’re in. An awful lot of people are doing the same sort of things so here’s a shout out to everyone doing their part to protect people and keep things moving.”

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Respiratory therapist is a breath of fresh air

BY ROB HEDELT
THE FREELANCE-STAR

Leigh Haverstick can succinctly explain the highs and lows she and other medical staff are experiencing right now in the fight to save patients with COVID-19.

The Mary Washington Hospital respiratory therapist notes that staffers on the front line all went into medicine to help people. And she accepts that in their careers, medical workers knew they would occasionally find themselves “standing in the gap” at the end of a patient’s life.

“But no one, none of us, ever imagined that we would have the privilege, the honor of being able to represent a family and be in someone’s last moments because no one else could be,” she said. “That’s happening now.”

But the 45-year-old Spotsylvania County resident with a “glass half full” outlook said there are also positive moments in the fight that help soothe her soul.

“Oh, my gosh, there are patients on ventilators who do make it off,” she said, noting that several of the initial patients she saw with COVID-19 recovered and left the ICU.

“At the beginning, you’re not sure

NOMINATE A ‘HOMETOWN HERO’

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what’s going to happen, and you pour all your efforts and love and time into trying to help them get better,” she said. “To have a patient you once worried might not make it later be wheeled out to a step-down unit is just such a wonderful thing.”

Haverstick’s passion to help her patients and support her fellow workers, in mind and body, are what earned her a nomination as a local “Hometown Hero,” an ongoing column feature.

The therapist, who works mostly in the emergency room and the COVID ICU these days, was nominated by friend and fellow Spotsylvanian Dawn Ruffner, who said Haverstick is simply “an inspiration on how to be a good hu-

man being.”

Ruffner notes that Haverstick’s job involves drawing blood to determine how a patient is breathing and making changes to the ventilators that bring life support.

“She is a single mom of three girls, working long hours, day and night, and is separated from her girls when she’s at home in order to keep them safe,” said Ruffner. “At one point, Leigh was showing signs of COVID and her girls had to stay with another family for two weeks. Luckily, it turned out to be bronchitis.”

The nomination notes that in addition to working on the front lines with

SEE HERO, A5

patients, the therapist “organized community support from friends and businesses who provided hot meals for hospital staff, as well as disinfecting wipes, vacuum bags, and multiple batches of homemade masks and surgical caps.”

In addition, said Ruffner, the tireless Haverstick “wrote inspirational messages and words of encouragement on the walls of the parking garage at Mary Washington Hospital at least three weeks before ‘Chalk the Walk’ became a thing. She shares on Facebook information on local resources that are free or discounted for first responders and health care workers.”

Somewhat embarrassed by the accolades, the selfless Haverstick argues that she’s no big hero, only someone doing what she can in a tough time. And she says that the efforts she’s gotten involved with to find supplies, food and more weren’t all about her.

“I really like helping people and don’t want anyone to be overlooked, or not have something they really need,” she said. “I tend to throw things out on Facebook about things that are needed. In that, I’ve really been more the procurer, the clearing-house, for masks and other

things that I helped get where they were needed.”

Mention the inspirational messages, and you’ll get a laugh out of the good-natured Haverstick.

“I tried to be very sneaky and not get caught doing that, but didn’t succeed,” she said, noting that she’d read something about how positive messages in chalk at another hospital had lifted spirits of staff. “So I tried to sneak inbetween shifts on a day when I was off to write some uplifting things in the parking garage.”

When someone approached her and asked if they could take a photo of her at work, she didn’t think much about it. At least, not until pictures of her and her messages spread throughout the hospital.

“It sort of caught on,” she said, downplaying her part in that. “Now the hospital puts chalk out for people who come through to write positive messages.”

One thing that’s not so positive is the fear that Haverstick and others on the front line feel about the possibility, despite all precautions, that they could bring home the disease to their families.

“That part is really hard,” said Haverstick. “Everyone says that we signed up to be in medicine and to face the dangers that poses and that’s true. But none of us signed up to work with something that could kill our families because of the jobs we chose.”

Haverstick’s oldest

daughter has gone to Williamsburg for the time being to help take care of her grandparents. To minimize the risk to her other daughters, the therapist is living in a section of the house away from them, eating and living apart.

“I cook dinner, put the food on the counter and they go off and eat in one area while I move and eat in another, by myself,” she said. “We did download some games that we could play together from different parts of the house and that was nice.”

She credits the hospital with finding ways to keep staff safe as the battle against the coronavirus has gone on, from personal air purifying systems that she and other respiratory therapists wear to critical equipment that protects staff even if it isn’t changed as often as before because it’s scarce.

“It’s such a weird world we’re living in right now,” she said. “It feels like we’re living in a dystopian movie that we’re also watching at the same time. It’s very unnerving, but the medical part of me finds it a challenge.”

“I hope we never see times like this again, but think in the end it could end up changing our lives for the better by making us remember what’s really important in our lives.”

ICU nurse does it all for his community

LIKE MANY people who hang onto a nugget of advice from a wise, older relative, Chris Fisher says something his grandfather told him years ago shapes how he lives.

The 44-year-old ICU nurse and scoutmaster said his grandfather advised him to chip in and help in the community as much as he could for as long as he could. The older man knew that one day, Fisher might need help from someone else.

“I really do believe that service and volunteerism is an important part of character,” he said. “And I’ve tried to do what

he recommended.”

Fisher lives that credo. He works long shifts treating COVID-19 patients at Spotsylvania Regional Medical Center and provides volunteer care for fellow church members. He also instructs advance members of his Boy Scout troop in Tappahannock—something he does virtually these days.

HERE & THERE

Rob Hedelt



SEE HEDELT, C3

NOMINATE A ‘HOMETOWN HERO’

Columnist Rob Hedelt wants readers to nominate local people they feel are “Hometown Heroes” in the midst of the coronavirus outbreak. He wants to highlight the efforts of those on the front lines of the crisis—be they medical staff or the person stocking shelves in an area grocery store. He also wants to hear about people who are going out of their way to be kind, helpful or make a difference in this tough time.

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HEDELT

► FROM C1

For all the ways he helps other, Fisher has been declared a Hometown Hero.

In nominating her parishioner Fisher for the distinction, the Rev. Catherine Hicks of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Port Royal noted Fisher was getting trained as an operating room nurse when the coronavirus hit. He was asked by Spotsylvania Regional to put that on hold to come back to the hospital's Intensive Care Unit to help cope with the influx of patients with COVID-19.

Hicks said Fisher "took this change in good grace and has applied his usual diligence to his work back in the ICU," then added that he's "not only a hero in the work world, but is also scoutmaster for Troop 304 in Tappahannock.

"During this period of social distancing, he has kept his troop together by figuring out how they can continue to meet virtually," she said. "This troop continues to work and play together online. And like other leaders, Chris is having to make some hard decisions about how to move forward over the next several months with this group, and he is doing that thoughtfully and thoroughly."

Beyond that, she said Fisher "is the most wonderful member of St. Peter's, taking it on himself to visit older parishioners with health issues, to check their blood pressure, to answer questions, to provide reassurance, and to help with the little emergencies that people living in rural areas need help with. He is also a lay Eucharistic minister and takes communion to people, and helps do all sorts of things around the church that need doing."

She closed by adding that Fisher "has even grown his hair long several times with the express purpose of donating his locks to Locks of Love so that his hair can be used for wigs for cancer patients."

Contacted about the nomination, Fisher said what most medical folks are saying these days: that he's no hero, and is just like every other medical worker who got into the business to help patients get better.

Fisher, who lives just over the Caroline County line in Essex County, said he didn't think twice about coming back from training to help in the ICU.

"I got into this to take care of sick people, and COVID patients right now are the sickest," he said. He noted that it's been tough to deal with how rapidly COVID-19 patients become ill, and the deaths of some of those patients.

"Thankfully, we've also had some successes, people who were so sick but end up being able to walk out of our hospital," he said. "It's a real pleasure to see that happen, and a big thing, even for the nurses

and staff that didn't have direct contact with the patient. Everyone's work helps, and we have to celebrate the victories."

Fisher noted that though all patients are different, he and other medical staffers have often seen COVID-19 patients who present with a chest X-ray that looks like pneumonia.

"But things move quickly, we intubate them and they start going downhill fast," he said. "The doctors and all on the medical team do everything possible, but it feels like the disease is hard to catch up to."

He said it takes a toll on all hospital workers.

"You feel like you're trying and trying and throwing everything you have against the disease, and there's real despair when things don't go well," he said. "When that happens, we stick together and do things as nurses to lift each other up and it helps."

Fisher, who has two sons and a daughter, said his involvement in Boy Scouts started when one of his boys joined the troop in Tappahannock.

"I started by going on campouts with him, then became an assistant scoutmaster and now this is my third year as scoutmaster," he said, "and it's been a blast."

These days, meetings and instruction happens via Zoom and "patrol calls," with boards of review happening over the phone. An Eagle Scout in Fisher's troop has continued his work on a trail at historic Menokin in Richmond County and will soon get his award.

"I enjoy it," he said, "but it's almost a full-time job."

Fisher said his assistance to older church parishioners grew from him making it known that folks could call on him if they had concerns or questions.

"Sometimes, something has happened and they're not sure whether they should call 911, or they've missed a dose of medicine and don't know how to proceed," he said.

He's glad to answer questions, and sometimes gives people rides to the doctor or hospital when they're afraid to drive.

One thing he tries to tell everyone is how easily and rapidly the coronavirus can spread.

"I tell people to put glitter on their hands and then go about their day and see where it all ends up," he said.

Fisher is sad to say that he thinks people's experience with the virus will probably make shaking hands, hugging and other personal contact iffy even after this virus subsides.

"It will be a shame if we can't go back to some of that contact, because it was often a part of connecting—more often with families than patients themselves," he said, "especially when things got emotional and big decisions were being made."

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Riverbend student puts tech savvy to use to help neighbors

BY ROB HEDLET
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

When Guido Visioni was hanging out at home in Fawn Lake early on in the coronavirus pandemic, the high school student heard his mother exclaim while reading posts on the community's Facebook page.

Guido, a rising senior at Riverbend High School, said he was struck to hear his mother express concern "because so many people who live here are at high risk of the virus and worried about going out." That stuck with the Commonwealth Governor's School student, who competes in robotics and hopes to pursue technology education at MIT or a similar university after high school.

It affected him to the point that he created a website, flcovidcare.com, so residents in the Spotsylvania County subdivision where he lives can request that someone pick up food or groceries for them during the pandemic.

The site, which has gotten considerable use since it went up in mid-March, also provides a way for folks to volunteer to help do the shopping and picking up.

Because he created the functional website and because he's doing a lot of the shopping and errand-running, Visioni is recognized as a Hometown Hero.

In suggesting him for recognition, reader Jane Guerin referenced his creation of the site and the fact that he then publicized it by placing flyers in all the mailboxes in Fawn Lake.

"The HOA also advertised this," said Guerin, noting how impressed she has been with this "service that will do shopping, pick-up meds and errands totally free of charge for those quarantined in Fawn Lake."

She noted that people who want help just have to go to the website Visioni created and say what they need. Noting that she's used the service a handful

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VISIONI

► FROM C1

of times, Guerin added, “I’m in the high risk group and so I appreciate the help.”

Contacted about his efforts and website, Visioni said he did it to help others in his community.

“It feels good to know you’re helping and the people using the service have been really nice about it, handing me and other volunteers thank-you notes with really sweet messages,” he said.

“One lady, who has autoimmune issues, lives alone and has children that live halfway across the country. She’s been just so grateful. We have a lot of older residents in the community who appreciate the help.”

He said Fawn Lake residents have mainly asked for help getting groceries, picking up their prescriptions and, in a case of two, finding some garden supplies.

Visioni, who has racked up hundreds of volunteer hours so far, said most stores and pharmacies let him get what residents need, though some medicines must be picked-up by older members of the 10 or so volunteers who are helping him.

He noted that he’s had close

to 20 people use the service so far, with five or more using it at least once a week. Most of them are people he didn’t know before launching flcovidcare.com.

“People who can’t or don’t want to use the website just call me,” said Visioni, noting that one resident “doesn’t like emails or texts and just reads me her 20 items each week.”

The young man who figures he’d only been to a grocery store a handful of times in his life before this now knows the

layout of the store he frequents like the back of his hand.

“I now have the produce section memorized,” he said. “Everyone wants their veggies. Early on, I had to keep asking things like, ‘Where are the tomatoes? Where is the cabbage and parsley?’ Now I know where everything is.”

He said that in most cases, he and other shoppers send the people they’re shopping for the cost of what was picked up and then get reimbursed by check, cash or PayPal.

“I go [to the store] lots of days, but if a request comes in and I’m just back from a trip, I pass it on to one of the other volunteers,” said Visioni, noting that he typically shops for his family on most runs since he’s already going.

The student, who was dismayed to see his robotic team’s competition cancelled by the virus earlier this year, says he’s committed to keeping the pickup service running “until either the virus is gone or I go back to school.”

“Even then, some of our other volunteers might take over,” he added.

Visioni said he hasn’t really been scared while out shopping, noting that he’s worn a mask since the start, follows social distancing and gets in and out of stores as quickly as possible.

“For a while, getting toilet paper was a challenge,” he said, adding that one day he bought a large package of it and put some rolls aside for a day when residents expressed a critical need.

The son of Agostino and Laura Visioni closed by saying, “The only thing I had trouble getting so far has been yeast, which was for my mom. Like everybody else out there, she’s been baking up a storm.”

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Medical assistant lives on front line of COVID-19 fight

BY ROB HEDELT
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Though pregnant when the coronavirus hit, Kristen Bageant never seriously considered backing away from her job as a medical assistant in an urgent care clinic or as a volunteer EMT.

At least, she didn't until a month ago, when the eight-months-pregnant Orange County resident followed her doctor's advice and stepped away from running rescue squad calls in Spotsylvania County.

Bageant, who interacted with several COVID-19 patients between her day job and running rescue squad calls, said she's just not the kind of person who shies away from situations like that.

"I'm certainly not trying to downplay the dangers that the coronavirus presents, because it's as serious as it can be," she said. "But as long as I could take the precautions you need to in order to stay healthy and protect yourself, I wasn't going to stop doing the jobs I've been trained to do."

For her service in a challenging time, Bageant is a Hometown Hero.

She was nominated by her father, James Todd, who said she "always gives compassionate care to her patients as well as their families. Whether attending to serious injuries or offering reassurance, she puts her whole heart into her job."

Todd noted that his daughter has been exposed to multiple confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the performance of her duties at the urgent care facility, "yet continues to focus on her mission daily with a dedication that amazes me."

Bageant has one son with another on the way, and volunteers as a firefighter and emergency medical technician at the Thornburg station in Spotsylvania County. Her father said that not long ago, "her unit was first to arrive to an ATV accident and her quick response

likely saved the leg of a little boy."

Bageant remembers applying a tourniquet to the 13-year-old boy who had a severe injury around his kneecap.

"Even when your brain is going a thousand miles a minute, the adrenaline kicks you back to what you've been trained to do," she said. "In the moment you have to be able to compartmentalize. But later on, your emotions can and will catch up to you, so it's important to have people around you can talk to and get help from."

Once, while off duty, she came upon the scene of an accident where a car had flipped over on a rural road.

"She immediately jumped out to render aid to her fellow citizens in their greatest time of need and stayed until help arrived," her father said. "As a volunteer firefighter and EMT, she has been on many harrowing calls for help, always running toward the danger."

Bageant said what just about every health care

NOMINATE A 'HOMETOWN HERO'

Columnist Rob Hedelt wants readers to nominate local people they feel are "Hometown Heroes" in the midst of the coronavirus outbreak. He wants to highlight the efforts of those on the front lines of the crisis—be they medical staff or the person stocking shelves in an area grocery store. And also people who are going out of their way to be kind, helpful or making a difference in this tough time.

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worker contacted so far has said about their jobs and COVID-19.

"We do what we do because we enjoy helping people," she said. "I don't know of one person who would do this for any sort of spotlight. We do it to help our patients."

In her urgent care center job, the 29-year-old triages patients, assists with different procedures, does labs and provides other assistance as needed. The company she works for has a policy of asking employees to avoid publicity, so she asked that her

company not be named.

"I got into the job because of my medical background with emergency medical services," she noted, and said.

She said one patient presented with abdominal pain, so she and others didn't know until tests came back later that they had been exposed to coronavirus.

"Abdominal pain isn't something that you immediately think is COVID-related, and it was a little scary, but, all along, I was taking precautions, disinfecting and cleaning extensively, taking PPE

seriously and following all the checklists to stay safe," she said.

She self-quarantined after the exposure.

Bageant said being pregnant during the pandemic made her even more deliberate and dedicated to protecting herself and her family. She wasn't about to let it take her away from patients at her day job or rescue squad volunteering until about a month ago.

Bageant said she had always had a desire to volunteer in EMS, and attended an open house in 2013 for volunteer firefighters and rescue squad service in Spotsylvania.

Getting the training and certifications as she went, Bageant started out as a probationary firefighter and fought fires, then added a basic EMT certification in the rescue squad side of the volunteer department, and began running rescue squad calls.

"I do enjoy it, and on some days have done fire and rescue, and on other days, just rescue operations," she said.

Her sister, Amber Todd, is also an EMT, and they often work together on rescue squad calls.

And though she has some disdain for the whole notion of firehouse romances—"We kept it all off-duty and away from the station," she said—she did meet her husband, Jonathan Bageant, while both were firefighters at the same station.

Kristen Bageant said she'll take a break from her volunteering as her second child arrives, but expects to add that back into her routine as soon as she can.

"I especially love running calls with my sister, as we enjoy having that time together, doing something we're both passionate about," she said. "Once I'm cleared again by my OB-GYN, I'll fit it back into my schedule. I truly enjoy serving our community."

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Local vets never missed a beat during pandemic

BY ROB HEDELT
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

When the coronavirus hit in March, local veterinarians Gary Dunn and Stacy Horner—Dunn immediately knew business at their White Oak Animal Hospital was going to drastically change.

The married vets, who operate the animal hospital and an adjacent training center in southern Stafford County, knew their business would need to come up with a way to operate in a world where coronavirus was a constant threat.

Because of the way the caring couple has managed to maintain a high level of medical care for their four-legged patients, all while taking steps to protect pet owners and staffers from COVID-19 transmission, they are recognized as Hometown Heroes.

In nominating the couple, who have operated the practice for 24 years, Jackie DeVore said the veterinarians have been diligent in ensuring that all comers to White Oak Animal Hospital have remained safe during the pandemic.

DeVore, a White Oak Animal Hospital staffer, said people don't think much about animal hospitals being essential during something like a pandemic. But she pointed

out that care for animals is “paramount” to pet owners at all times.

“We have several immunocompromised staff members who were concerned about becoming infected at our hospital, but needed to work in order to pay the bills,” she said.

DeVore said that no one other than staffers have been allowed in the building, and that staffers have been wearing masks and gloves at all times.

“Some clients have not been happy about not being able to be with their pet during

visits,” she said, but noted the business owners “have been adamant that the staff be protected as best we can.”

I caught up recently with the veterinarians, who have been putting in longer hours than usual for the past few months, partly to keep up with constantly changing COVID-19 protocols and staffing complications. The couple started their first Virginia veterinary practice in Lynchburg after both graduated from the vet school at the University of Florida.

Dunn said through the pandemic, there's been a singular

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goal: “Keeping our staff safe and clients safe as we provide care for our patients, the pets. It's been really challenging, and I think our staff needs to

SEE DUNNS, C3

► FROM C1

get the highest accolades or recognition.”

That’s because, for most of the pandemic, customers who bring pets to White Oak have been calling when they enter the parking lot. Staffers have communicated with clients by phone when they arrive and have gone out to collect pets and bring them into the hospital, with the vets occasionally talking to customers by phone.

Horner–Dunn said several other things made providing care more complicated.

First, she said, there has been a marked increase in the number of pets coming in for treatment, something she attributes to the fact that more pet owners are at home and noticing their animals need care.

Second, with owners not able to come into the building with them, the companion animals and small mammals the practice treats have been more of a challenge.

“Some have definitely been more stressed,” she said. “Coming into the building without their people makes our job harder. We want everything here to be as positive an experience as possible, but when an owner can’t come in, some of the pets look and act more nervous than usual.”

Add the fact that early on, the animal hospital did what state and national veterinary organizations asked them to do: donate all their PPE equipment, their masks and gloves, to local hospitals that badly needed them.

Then there were the staffing issues.

“We had some staff scared or unable to come

in at times,” said Dunn, “either because they live with an elderly family member, because a member of their family was or could be exposed to COVID or because they had underlying medical conditions.”

He said some staffers left and then came back, and a reduced staff has at times made things tough in a period with more animals coming in that usual.

“We found ways to limit face-to-face contact with customers,” Horner–Dunn said. “The only exception has been when a pet was being euthanized. We felt at least one family member should be able to be present for that as it’s such an emotional thing.”

She said keeping staffers 6 feet apart in areas where pets are treated has been difficult, if not impossible.

“There are times when an animal is being examined and it may take several staffers to keep it in place,” said Stacy. “There’s no way everyone can stay 6 feet away from each other leaning over the table for that.”

Dunn said since COVID-19 hit, the practice has had to balance the safety of its staff versus service to clients.

“In taking steps to pro-

tect staff, you lose some of the face-to-face relationship building as our customers are kept outside the building,” he said.

Another challenge, he said, has been providing service in a timely fashion when they are busy, despite customers putting off routine procedures.

“Most of our clients have been extremely patient, though a small number have been upset that they’ve had to wait in their cars,” he said. “Thankfully, most have been really patient and understanding that we’re doing the best we can given the situation.”

The vets are adamant about one other aspect of providing animal care in a pandemic: They’re not unique among local veterinarians.

“We’re a representation of what’s happening at all other animal clinics in this time,” said Horner–Dunn. “I think all vets are like us, just bumping along. We’re all facing the same challenges and struggles and all trying to do our part because we know animals need medical care. After all, we all do this for a living because we love animals.”

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FOOD PANTRY QUICKLY OUTGROWS HUMBLE PLAN

Girl Scout troop meets needs at Aquia Harbour

BY ROB HEDELT
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

In March, not long after the coronavirus hit, the leader of Girl Scout Troop 412 in Aquia Harbour sat down with the troop members to talk about how they could help.

Scout leader Mary Robillard Lammert said one of the first ideas that clicked was setting up a food pantry for residents of the North Stafford community, largely so

older residents could avoid the shopping many were nervous about.

So the 10-member troop and several of their parents created what they called the “Keep the Harbour Home Food Pantry,” putting out word that donations were welcome.

Early on, the thought was that Girl Scouts and their parents would pick up a small number of donations from

residents’ front porches, then make them and items such as toilet paper available in a small locker in front of a community building.

That quickly morphed into a much bigger enterprise, with the Scouts getting permission to use the Harbour Inn building. For months now, residents of the subdivision have been coming through that building’s door in droves—some leaving

donations, others coming to pick up things they need.

For their hard work and dedication to the cause, Lammert, assistant troop leader Jessica Torres, other parent volunteers and the members of Troop 412 have been nominated, and confirmed, as Hometown Heroes.

Tina Klauser, a resident of Aquia Harbour, nominated the group and noted that the

SEE SCOUTS, A5

SCOUTS

► FROM A1

project's name, "Keep the Harbour Home Food Pantry" explains its purpose well.

She said that not only does the food pantry help residents whose incomes have declined, "it also helps folks who just need one or two things to avoid grocery store runs—hard for folks with children in tow and for people scared of going out."

Klauser said donations have "run the gamut: canned goods, paper goods, fresh vegetables, frozen foods, pet food. There is also a wish list sign-up so people can request donations of specialty items, such as specific infant formulas for babies with digestive or allergy problems."

Klauser closed out her nomination by noting that Lammert is the administrator and chief organizer of the project, with Torres, Joanne Ayres and Sabrina Thompson helping out.

"I can't begin to praise their work enough," she said.

Lammert said she is at the pantry most days, sometimes dropping by a few different times with her daughter Reese, a troop member, at her side.

"Initially, we didn't have space set up for a large pantry. We started out picking up things from people's houses with the idea was we'd stock a Rubbermaid locker with toilet paper and a few donated items," she said. "We didn't know how naïve we were about what would develop."

As donations quickly grew, Lammert said she and other troop leaders sought out the manager of Aquia Harbour, who offered the troop "what's essentially the clubhouse."

"It's perfect because it gave us access to a refrigerator and a large banquet room space with tables all around. We really appreciate being able to use it," she said.

Soon enough, she said, the pantry moved to being open seven days a week from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

"It's operating on more of an honor system, with no one staying there to monitor what comes in and what goes out," she said. "It's been stocked with everything from groceries to pet food to paper products. And someone has consistently been bringing in large quantities of toilet paper and paper towels."

To keep the troop and those who come to the pantry safe, no more than six people are allowed in at a time and twice a day volunteers use Lysol and Clorox on tables, door handles, light switches and more. Masks and latex gloves are provided.

And for those scared to come in: "We've told people from the start that if they can't get there or don't want to, we'll bring things to them. Most people, however, are coming on their own."

Aside from a neighborly spirit of people trying to help those who need it, Lammert said one thing that may prevent people from abusing the open-door policy is the fact that there's 24-hour video surveillance in the building.

The troop leader noted that since getting started in March, the pantry has typically been stocked with milk, bread, lunch meats, diapers and formula.

She believes residents of Aquia Harbour have been using the pantry for different reasons.

"I think some are probably older residents who don't want to go out anywhere, others are families who are especially in need right now because of lost jobs or furloughs," said Lammert.

"And I think we have a fairly large population of military spouses who are often home by themselves with children. It's easier to stop by and pick up one or two needed things at the pantry then packing everyone up and heading to the store."

She said most of the supplies in the pantry have been donated by Aquia Harbour residents, while a community group has been able to provide some monetary donations to buy items when the supply dips.

Aside from spreading the word about the pantry and its initial setup, Lammert said the work of keeping it going falls into two efforts: organizing what's donated and sanitizing the space to keep people safe.

"Myself and a co-leader in troop, Jessica Torres, split the effort, making sure one of us is there each morning and night," she said, noting that other folks and even another Girl Scout group, Troop 3195, have also pitched in.

"We involve the girls in the troop when we can make that safe," she said, noting that one thing they accomplished was setting up a table of donated books and children's activities. We've heard from several people that their kids love to go to the pantry, get a book and pick up a snack. For a lot of people right now, that's an outing the children wouldn't otherwise get.

"This pantry has been a success on more than one level," she said, "and I'm very proud of our girls

NEED FOOD?

Folks in need of groceries can get them free Saturday at two area locations as part of a giveaway being overseen by Caroline County residents Kevin and Paula Poole.

The couple said they raised \$7,000 from caring folks in the region to buy what they hope is enough food to feed 200 or so families.

"We know people are struggling right now, trying to decide whether to pay rent or buy food for their families and we just wanted to do something to help," Paula Poole wrote in an email. "Food is available to anyone who needs it, and it doesn't matter who they are or where they live. No questions will be asked. They just pull up, pop their trunks, people will load their groceries and they can be on their way. Social distancing will be in effect."

The food will be distributed Saturday, June 20, from 10 a.m. to noon at Caroline Community Center in Ladysmith, which is beside the Dollar General at 7278 Ladysmith Road; and from 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. at James Monroe High School in Fredericksburg, at 2300 Washington Ave.

for their work with it. It opened their eyes early on when we noted that some people might not have the food they need. They were really concerned and wanted to help."

Lammert, whose family has lived in the community for about four years, said one of the big questions is how long to keep the pantry operating.

"We're still going back and forth on whether to come up with a cutoff date or to ride out the length of the virus," she said, noting that continuing could well be the option, because the group is able to keep the pantry operating on donations that continue coming in.

"We'll just have to see," she said. "Some of us are getting a little worn out."

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MAKING REPAIRS SO OTHERS CAN MAKE MASKS

Shopkeeper keeps sewing machines humming

BY ROB HEDELT
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Greg Harding has been repairing and selling sewing machines for nigh on 40 years, but has never seen his services in such demand as they are now.

With everyone from novice sewers to accomplished quilters jumping in to make masks for hospitals and first responders, crowds of customers are turning to Harding at his A Stitch in Time store in the city's Eagle Village Shopping Center.

Some want new machines, some want their old ones repaired. Either way, they all want a working machine, and they want it now.

That's where Harding's work in the past month or so

has earned him gratitude and admiration for going above and beyond. He and his wife, Deanna, have been putting in 12-hour days—sometimes more—to put the volunteer mask-makers to work as quickly as possible.

Because he's been burning the candle at both ends, and even closed his shop's doors to concentrate on repairs, a handful of thankful fans and customers have nominated Harding as a Hometown Hero during the

coronavirus pandemic.

The nominations mention Harding's dedication to put in long, extra hours to repair the machines, willingness to wrestle with older and difficult machines and his kind way of dealing with customers.

Harding said he couldn't help but be moved by people who have brought all manner of sewing machines in for repairs.

"Everybody has dug out grandma's machine, Mama's,

or Uncle Fred's, and they want to make masks," he said. "It's ranged from quilters and everyday sewers to

others who are just trying to get started and learn to make masks for fire departments,

SEE HERO. C3

EMS service and others.”

Harding has repaired hundreds of machines since the pandemic hit, and said it became clear early on that business as usual wasn't going to work.

“We're running limited hours because I can't spare the time to talk to customers coming in and still handle the influx of repairs,” he said. “There's nowhere to walk in here right now, outside of a narrow little aisle. All the shelves are full.”

The machines have come in from all over the state and beyond, with one woman making the 160-mile trip from South Boston.

Deanna Harding said it's because her husband is good at what he does, and has the patience to figure out how to fix even the oldest and most difficult of sewing machines.

“You can be going along and doing well with different machines until you run into that one that doesn't want to cooperate,” said Greg Harding. “That's the kind you pull out hair on and put aside to come back to. Some nights we'll be here until midnight or 1 a.m. trying to keep up.”

Repairs run the gamut.

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“For some, you're just replacing parts, and for others you're dealing with broken gears or something really wrong,” said Harding. “With breaking needles, you have to troubleshoot the problem, oil the machine and try to bring it back to where it should be, tension wise.”

A Hartwood resident and native of the White Oak area of Stafford County, Harding said he's gratified when customers share what they've been able to do with their repaired machines.

“One customer, with family in Brazil, said they made more than 100 and sent them to those relatives. And another woman said she'd made more than 1,000 masks for others,” he said. “I feel a real responsibility to get these machines done

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so these customers can do these good things. If not, I'm standing in their way.”

He learned how to repair machines by doing it over several decades. Now he's doing repairs every day, even when the shop's not open.

“This has always been a steady business, and I've been able to eke out a living,” Harding said. “But since the virus hit, it has just been nuts. We've sold every used machine I serviced and put out, as well as all our lower-end and middle-of-the-road machines, and have 35 more on back order. But they're hard to get your hands on now. They're just not available.”

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COUPLE AND PARTNERS USE 3D PRINTERS TO MAKE MASKS

Stafford pair produces pounds of protection

BY ROB HEDELT

THE FREE LANCE-STAR

As people around the country follow stay-at-home orders to slow the spread of coronavirus, many are driven to find new ways to help.

Nathan and Meaghan Sekinger of Stafford County are in that group. They've created a 3D printer farm in their basement to crank out masks and face shields by the hundreds.

They've enlisted more than 100 others to do the same, and together they could end up topping out at more than 1,000 pieces of PPE for doctors, nurses, first responders and nursing homes.

For their time, caring and dedication to helping others in this critical time, I am honoring them as Hometown Heroes.

The couple was nominated by a handful of readers. Most pointed to the way the grassroots effort has become a collaboration between educators, friends and family.

Nathan Sekinger, the librarian at T. Benton Gayle Middle School in Stafford, said he and wife Meaghan have gotten more than they've given in the effort that started March 14.

"Our big takeaway, after initially feeling somewhat isolated from the people we love and care about, is that this project has given us an increased sense of belonging and community in our area and region,"

he said.

So just how did the educators—who for weeks have been juggling telework and home-schooling their 7- and 9-year-olds—happen to find themselves building a factory in their basement?

Nathan said it all started when he and

Meaghan, a former Stafford teacher who's now the Training and Technical Assistance Center coordinator at George Mason University, saw a request on a donation website for a 3D "Montana Mask" for use at Stafford Hospital.

SEE SEKINGERS, C3

SEKINGERS

► FROM C1

“Once the virus hit, we’d been feeling an overwhelming sense of concern and helplessness, a desire to help the community in some way,” said Meaghan Sekinger. “We brainstormed for a while about different things, tossing around different ideas. But this one really struck Nathan as something we could do.”

That’s partly because the school library where Nathan works has three 3D printers that the couple got permission to bring home for the mask-making effort. Calls to other Stafford librarians and requests to school administrators to borrow other school 3D printers pretty quickly brought in more.

“By the time we got to spring break, we had eight printers running in our basement,” said Meaghan. “We basically made a makeshift factory by setting the printers up on end tables, coffee tables and some other tables we borrowed.”

There are now 12 3D printers turning out components in the Sekingers’ basement, with another 10 printers working elsewhere in the community network to make pieces of masks and face shields.

Nathan said the printers use strings of a filament, a plant-based plastic polymer that is melted and applied layer by layer to create what’s being made.

The biggest piece in the assembly line is the framework of the mask, which takes roughly five hours to “print.” The Sekingers have also been making two other mask components: a small “filter holder” that filtering material fits into, and an “ear protector” that keeps the elastic band off a wear-

er’s ears.

One of the advantages of the mask design is that it only requires a small piece of the filter, allowing six times as many masks to be made with the hard-to-find material.

Seeing a need for face shields, the Sekingers found a printable design with a flexible top and a holder at the bottom. Add transparency film and a button to hold the elastic and, voila, you’ve got a face shield.

Nathan said they got designs from a website that distributes codes that get popped into the printers on a memory card.

“It takes a little bit of juggling, because it’s not really plug-and-play,” he said.

Meaghan said the entire Sekinger family has been on quite the schedule. She and her husband telework from home during the day while Nathan juggles homeschooling and communicating with his students and teachers.

“The trickiest part of the process has been the time it takes to assemble the pieces and being able to get the raw materials,” she said, adding that the masks require weather stripping on the edges and elastic around the back.

But a funny thing happened to solve both problems. The couple put out the word they could use donations of materials and created a wish list on Amazon. Friends, family, co-workers and others began to purchase and deliver materials. Others have volunteered to help with assembling the pieces, with the owner and staff at Stafford’s Potomac Point Winery stepping in with a major commitment.

“And we do now have some Stafford schools and community partners who are printing in their homes, as well,” said Nathan. “And

There are now 12 3D printers turning out components in the Sekingers’ basement, with another 10 printers working elsewhere in the community network to make pieces of masks and face shields.

some of the folks at the Central Rappahannock Regional Library are now making face shields.”

Stories about their effort on Washington television stations have brought in many more requests for masks and face shields. Virginia long-term care facilities have asked for 900 masks, while Westmoreland County has requested 200 masks for county staff, correctional workers and police.

“And we’ve had lots of individual requests from individual nurses and crews from Mary Washington and Stafford hospitals and others,” said Meaghan.

The Sekingers have a special email address for medical personnel looking for PPE and anyone interested in helping: makethemasksfredva@gmail.com.

Meaghan said because their children are young, she and Nathan try to keep discussions about the virus and its effects age appropriate, and for safety’s sake, have made the basement off limits to them.

“It will be interesting to see the impact on them when they’re older and they can understand what was really going on in the basement,” she said.

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