



# INSIDENOVA

## PRINCE WILLIAM

\$1

APRIL 3-9, 2020

WWW.INSIDENOVA.COM

# FACES of a CRISIS

The coronavirus pandemic has affected individuals and families across the Prince William community in a variety of ways. No one is immune from the disease or its impacts. Some are hurting; some are healing; some are helping. This week's newspaper spotlights some of those stories.



**James and Sharrelle Higgins**  
Family's coronavirus quarantine  
Page 2



**Christina Brooks**  
Volunteer making masks  
Page 3



**Sharita Rouse**  
Candy apple businesses serving meals instead  
Page 4



**Jake Agnos**  
Pro baseball player sent home  
Page 5



**Joanne Blue**  
Senior struggles with COVID-19  
Page 6



**Michelle Dargusch**  
Teaching 27 students — remotely  
Page 6



**Verdell Robinson**  
Family faces mourning in crisis  
Page 7



**Yasmeen Rahman**  
Day care owner pushing ahead  
Page 8



**Carla Thompson**  
Helping her restaurant staff  
Page 8

During the coming weeks, we will share more stories about the impacts of the pandemic on our community and the people who live here. Please email your story to [info@insidenova.com](mailto:info@insidenova.com).

 For up-to-date news on coronavirus and more, visit [InsideNoVa.com](http://InsideNoVa.com) and subscribe to our email newsletters and breaking news alerts.

PRINCE WILLIAM TODAY

SUBSCRIBE TODAY



[INSIDENOVA.COM/SUBSCRIBE](http://INSIDENOVA.COM/SUBSCRIBE)

[SUBSCRIBE@INSIDENOVA.COM](mailto:SUBSCRIBE@INSIDENOVA.COM)

CALL: 703-318-1386

8 57144 00400 1

# At home with COVID-19

## Dumfries family spent weeks waiting for test

» BY EMILY SIDES  
esides@insidenova.com

Dumfries resident James Higgins started feeling sick March 9 on a snowboarding trip in Idaho. It wasn't until March 27 that he learned he had COVID-19.

His wife, Sharrelle Higgins, 53, told InsideNoVa on Monday that she is also sick

and received a COVID-19 test Friday. She said she was told the results could take a week or longer to return. She is concerned about the virus, because she has diabetes and her husband has high blood pressure — two risk factors that make them more likely to face complications with the coronavirus.

The couple, who have been married 28 years, are at home with their 17-year-old son, but living separately as much as possible, Sharrelle said. After she found out her husband tested positive, she and her

son began a 14-day quarantine in case they have the virus as well.

They don't have any protective personal gear, such as masks or gloves, she said. She hasn't been able to find cleaning supplies such as Lysol or Clorox "in a 50-mile radius."

"We need three separate thermometers," she said. "I've had a fever. My husband has a fever."

Her son can't monitor his temperature. She stopped at a CVS while she was in Arlington to get tested for COVID-19, but the store didn't have any thermometers.

"A friend ordered one online and it will get here Thursday," she said.

Sharrelle Higgins said her husband visited urgent care multiple times and the emergency room twice. On March 12, he was diagnosed with the flu and told to remain quarantined at home.

On March 19, he was told at the emergency room that he has pneumonia.

Despite his symptoms — fever, chills, coughing — medical staff have told him he couldn't get a test for coronavirus due to a limited number of tests.

James received the test last week after Sharrelle posted on Facebook about their difficulties.

Sharrelle said she thought it was ridiculous that it was so difficult to get her husband tested for COVID-19. Her son, who has asthma, can't get tested even though he's been exposed to his dad, because he



James and Sharrelle Higgins before a night out Feb. 15. James has been sick since March 9 and was finally diagnosed with COVID-19 on March 27. PROVIDED



*"You try to sanitize as you go."*

— SHARRELLE HIGGINS, WIFE OF COVID-19 PATIENT AT HOME

doesn't have any symptoms, she said.

At a news conference Monday, Virginia Department of Health officials said there isn't widespread testing due to national supply chain shortages keeping hospitals and private labs from being able to offer more tests.

For now, the family is trying to get through each day, separately.

"It's extremely difficult with the three of us in the house," Sharrelle said. "We still have to cook. We are all on a rotation schedule to get in the kitchen. You try to sanitize as you go."

# Stitching in time

## Call for face masks reaches the right pair of hands

» BY JARED FORETEK  
jforetek@insidenova.com

Pleas for personal protective equipment from doctors, nurses and first-responders throughout the region are driving some residents to take matters into their own hands. In Manassas, one woman is using her social distancing free time to do what she can, making protective face masks for those in need of the critical supplies.

A month ago, Christina Brooks was designing costumes and sets as a manager for the Manassas Ballet Theatre. Now, her days are spent cutting cotton swatches and HEPA vacuum filters to meet a growing number of requests from local nurses, EMT workers and even gas station employees.

A nurse in Fairfax who Brooks knew through the ballet first brought up the idea. Her colleagues were becoming concerned about their stock of protective equipment, and she wondered whether Brooks' crafting skills could be turned to masks, a small-scale parallel to the state government asking private manufacturers to reorient their production facilities for needed medical supplies.

"Apparently they were running low on

masks and she was having to reach into the last bit she had," Brooks said. "I figured I'd give it a try."

After ordering some cotton and watching a YouTube video, Brooks got to work. She first cuts the cotton into rectangles, stitches the ends together to form a slot for replaceable filters, folds some pleats and binds the edges with elastic.

After inserting garbage bag twist ties for nose wires and sliding in the filter, she packs them into Ziploc baggies of five or six to be sent off to their destination.

"I'm at a place where I can devote the sewing time to this at the moment," Brooks said. "I just thought it was going to be a one or two thing, and it's really taken off. ... I'm sure that I'm just going to keep making them and that way I can give them to whoever needs them."

Last week, Gov. Ralph Northam said Virginia had received its first shipment of personal protective equipment from a national stockpile controlled by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Another shipment is expected this week, and the state is partnering with private industry to help with manufacturing.

Hospitals have not publicly provided



Christina Brooks is spending her time at home creating masks for first responders and other essential workers. PROVIDED



many specifics about their supply levels, but Northam has made clear that if the virus continues its spread, and infected patients become sicker, the system could face a shortage. As of Wednesday, over 200 Virginians had been hospitalized because of the virus, and that number was growing by 30 or 40 a day. Northam has told hospitals statewide to postpone elective surgeries to preserve beds and equipment.

Governors across the country are reporting similar shortages, and there have been reports of states competing over the same supplies on the private market, bidding up prices. Hospital systems across Virginia have also put out calls for donations.

At the micro-level, word has gotten out

about Brooks' masks. And now, she said, the requests are rolling in — an EMT niece, a medical worker sister, a mutual friend with a compromised immune system. As of last Wednesday, she had made about 150 reusable masks.

She pays for all her supplies out of pocket and has even gotten some other theater friends in on the crafting. All she asks in return is that, if people are able to, they consider making a donation to the Manassas Ballet Theatre.

"People just started contacting me, 'Oh can you make a few for this person?' We're all just rallying together and using our skills to help the health care people who are on the front lines," she said. "I'm going to sweet talk my husband into cutting some squares."

# Still filling tummies

## Candy apple stand puts hot meals on the menu

» BY JARED FORETEK  
jforetek@insidenova.com

Sharita Rouse is no stranger to feeding people. Tummy Yum Yum, her candied apple shop in Old Town Manassas, has been churning out the sweet fruits since 2016, when she moved to the area from North Carolina.

But on Tuesday morning, there was no caramel or apples to be found in her kitchen. Instead, there were boxes and boxes of corned beef and mashed potatoes, bagged up and ready to be handed out.

Rouse was helping the area's homeless population long before the coronavirus came to Virginia, handing out hot lunches from her shop's window four days a week. But when schools in Prince William County and Manassas closed earlier this month, she knew some kids would miss hot meals as a result. And when the economic toll of closed shops and restaurants began to set in, she knew there would be more hungry adults as well.

With the help of volunteer kitchen hands and drivers, as well as Crossroads Tabletop Tavern and Three Monkeys Pub and Chophouse, the shop has been distributing over 100 meals per day Tuesdays through Fridays — mostly to kids, Rouse

says, but also for anyone affected by the economic crisis that's come with the pandemic.

"When I saw the need, I knew I had to jump in and do something. I have three children, and I would hope that somebody would help my kids if they needed it," Rouse says. "This is our community. What do we want, these kids to be out stealing food? I can't see that."

In some respects, Rouse is among the more fortunate business owners in the neighborhood that was bustling with drink and dining options just weeks ago. Unlike many others, she has been able to keep her two employees on the payroll and says that business has been good. A Christian, Rouse says, "It's God's favor." After the business's expenses are paid, she says, what's left goes to feeding her community.

She said over half the calls she has received since the economy largely shut down have been from adults newly in need of a helping hand. Now, they're asking to be put on her delivery list.

"Sometimes it's just an older couple -- the husband is working and the wife is laid off and they have a child. Well, I'm going to feed everybody," Rouse said. "I don't care if you're a child or a less fortunate adult. If you come to the window and ask for something to eat, you'll be able to get it."

Attracting volunteers has been a chal-



Sharita Rouse hands meals to a Manassas police officer for delivery March 31.

JARED FORETEK | INSIDENOVA

lenge with rapidly increasing calls for people to stay home to slow the spread of the virus. On Monday, Gov. Ralph Northam issued a mandatory stay-at-home order, with exceptions for essential travel and exercise, but it also allows travel for volunteers, too.

Rouse says she isn't afraid of how things will go if the period of economic inactivity and stay-at-home orders continues for months. When, she hopes, things return to some sense of normalcy, there will still

be people in the community who need a hot meal. And, Rouse says, she'll still be there to feed them.

"If tomorrow they said we're all going back to normal, I know there's still going to be people coming to my window. So, no, I don't worry about anything," she said. "My faith tells me that I shouldn't worry, and faith and fear don't work together. Every day I come in here, it's a faith walk."

# Off the Field

## Young baseball pro faced quarantine

» BY DAVID FAWCETT  
dfawcett@insidenova.com

Jake Agnos had never been away from baseball this long.

But the Battlefield High School graduate had no choice. His first full season as a pro was on hold after he and the other



**JAKE AGNOS**

New York Yankees minor-league players had to spend two weeks in quarantine in Tampa, Fla., after one of the players tested positive for the coronavirus.

After Yankees general manager Brian Cashman told the minor-leaguers of the first positive test March 15, the players immediately headed to their temporary homes and did the best they could to stay active and entertain themselves.

For Agnos and his two roommates, Evan Voliva and Josh Smith, that meant quarantining in a rented double-wide Airbnb.

Unable to retrieve their equipment, the trio had to keep themselves busy in other ways.

Agnos took up the ukulele, which belonged to Voliva, a former East Carolina University teammate. Agnos had never played a musical instrument before, but through YouTube instructional videos, he became competent enough to impress even himself with his progress.

The three also played video games (MLB The Show was the most popular) and posted funny home workout videos to share with others. The self-dubbed Quarantine Workout Challenge included races against ducks and pushing a pickup.

The Yankees provided three meals a day for the players and \$75 a day for meal money, up from the standard \$25 a day.

Agnos said his biggest worry wasn't catching the virus but possibly giving it to others.

Agnos grew concerned when he experienced a loss of smell and taste during the quarantine period. He checked with the Yankees' head trainer and they both agreed allergies explained Agnos' condition.

"The Yankees did a great job of communicating," said Agnos, who drove back to Haymarket Saturday. "And with our age group, we're in shape. I was not scared of getting it. I didn't want to pass it along when I got home."

Agnos said It's weird to be back this time of year. But he's adjusting.

"We're driving our mom crazy by not cleaning up after ourselves," Agnos said, "but we're going to do a better job."

# ‘Never, ever believe it won’t happen to you’

» BY KARI PUGH  
karipugh@insidenova.com

Joanne Blue, 65, suffered a mild stroke earlier this year and after about a month recovering at Lake Manassas Health and Rehabilitation Center in Gainesville, she was scheduled to go home March 26. As her daughter, Joni Blue, was getting dressed and ready to head out the door that morning to pick her up, her mom called.

“Don’t come,” she said. “I have a fever.”

It had already been almost three weeks since the family had been able to visit

Joanne Blue, because the rehabilitation center restricted visitors to help prevent the spread of coronavirus. Joni Blue and her children would go by the elder Blue’s window and wave, but could not visit in person.

During the day she first spiked a fever, Joanne Blue was treated with Tylenol, and mom and daughter communicated by phone. During one conversation, Joanne Blue told her daughter, “This fever is kicking my butt.”

She said she had unbearable pain in her upper back and shoulders and her head

hurt so bad she couldn’t open her eyes.

Early the next morning, March 27, her fever broke. But by sunrise it had returned.

“My mom called me that morning and said, ‘I’m having a hard time, the fever won’t go, I keep taking Tylenol, my chest is feeling tight,’” Joni Blue said.

Joni Blue said she called the facility several times, then finally hopped in her car and drove over. A nursing supervisor came out and told her they were treating her mom with Tylenol.

Joni Blue went over to her mom’s window and tapped on the glass.

“My mom came to the window and she looked like hell,” Blue said. “Just seeing how hard it was for her to get from the bed to the window, I knew she needed to go to the hospital.”

She told the nursing supervisor, “If you’re not going to call the paramedics, I am.”

Joanne Blue was taken to Novant Health UVA Health Systems’ Haymarket Medical Center, where she was tested for coronavirus and told it would take up to seven days to get the results.

But while she was there, other patients from Lake Manassas Health and Rehab were brought to the hospital with similar symptoms, Blue said. That’s when the medical team decided to perform a more rapid-response coronavirus test, with results the next day, she said.

Medical Facilities of America, the company that operates Lake Manassas Health and Rehab, did not return requests for comment this week.

The hospital released Joanne Blue back to Lake Manassas the same day. Three days later, the test results were in: Joanne Blue had COVID-19.



Joanne Blue at Manassas National Battlefield Park a few weeks before suffering a mild stroke and being sent to Lake Manassas Health and Rehabilitation. PROVIDED

By Monday, she had declined rapidly, her fever gone but her chest tight. A cough and a rash developed. Blue, usually sharp and observant, began sounding confused, her daughter said. She fell in the bathroom over the weekend and hit her head. She complained that her head hurt.

Joanne Blue was taken by ambulance back to Haymarket Medical Center. On Wednesday, she remained hospitalized with pneumonia caused by coronavirus. Her family cannot go to see her.

Before her decline and hospitalization March 30, Joanne Blue spoke by phone with InsideNoVa, recalling how her illness started with an awful headache and a fever that left her freezing.

“This is something that you don’t think is going to happen,” she said. “I’m here to tell you, never, ever believe it won’t happen to you.”

Joni Blue said her mom is tough. “I don’t know how tough this virus is, but it’s got one hell of a fight coming.”

## Teacher educating 27 students remotely

» EMILY SIDES  
esides@insidenova.com

Michelle Dargusch has been a teacher for Prince William County Public Schools for 14 years.

With schools closed for the rest of the academic year, she is updating her class website and emailing with the parents of her 27 second-grade students.

“I have sent them emails just checking in on them and their children,” she said. “Several students have emailed me through their parent’s email to say hello. Many parents have emailed me telling me what their child has been working on at home.”

She is also connecting parents with websites helpful for online learning and offered a few optional assignments.

On March 26, she had her first Zoom meeting with her students, 23 of whom

participated.

“It was so nice to see my students,” she said. “Going from spending 30-plus hours a week with them to nothing at all has been very sad. I miss all my students.”

The children were happy to see everyone, Dargusch said.

“I think we all needed to see each other,” she said. “I loved hearing what they had been doing in the last few weeks. They talked about taekwondo, getting a new puppy, playing video games, doing schoolwork, talking on FaceTime with their friends, and much more.”

Dargusch also is helping her two sons, in first and fifth grades, with their lessons at home. “This is challenging for the younger one because first-graders are not as independent as fifth-graders,” she said. “He needs more explanation and support. This is difficult to do while I am trying to focus on my students. We are doing the best we can.”

Dargusch’s husband is still required to go to work, but he is also able to work from home more, she said. “This is uncharted territory for everyone.”



MICHELLE DARGUSCH

# Honoring his memory

## Verdell Robinson's family refuses to dwell on what-ifs

» DAVID FAWCETT  
dfawcett@insidenova.com

As family members shared their favorite thoughts and memories of Verdell Robinson and how he blessed their lives, one of his sons detected a common theme.

"We all have a little Verdell in us," Denard Robinson said. "We need to carry on his legacy. He touched a lot of people."

A former Manassas Park High School head boys basketball coach and the father of former Virginia Tech standout point guard Justin Robinson, Verdell passed away March 21 at his home in Manassas of a heart attack at the age of 70.

In talking about how his father, Denard refused to let bitterness or frustration overwhelm him as the coronavirus upends the health-care industry as well as how funerals are being handled. Verdell was scheduled to receive a heart stent March 20 at Novant Health UVA Health Systems Prince William Medical Center in Manassas.

But the procedure was cancelled because of the coronavirus. In addition to preparing for the spike in coronavirus cases, the hospital had to take Verdell's age into consideration, even though Verdell was in good physical shape, Denard said.

"It was a precaution," Denard said. "They didn't want to expose him."

An Army veteran, Verdell was buried March 26 at Quantico National Cemetery.

Because of restrictions against gatherings of more than 10 people, the family had to watch from their cars while Verdell'sasket was taken to the plot.

Earlier in the day, the family held a funeral service at Pierce Funeral Home in Manassas. But people came inside in groups to pay their respects from 9 a.m. to noon.

The same was true when the family held a private service afterward at the funeral home. People could watch the service on Facebook Live. Denard said the family plans to hold a memorial service at a later time to celebrate Verdell's life.

Denard said the family wanted to do the service now instead of waiting until the restrictions were lifted.

"I look at it as everything God does for He does for a reason," Denard said. "[Verdell] was happy all the time. He would not have wanted a big funeral service. I'm not too upset. It was done for a reason and he wanted things to be done easy."

Even though Verdell was technically Denard's uncle, Denard considered him his father. Verdell and his wife, Alyse, took Denard in when he was 14 after his mother died. Denard's father, Verdell's brother, had also passed away by that time.

Calling Verdell his role model, Denard said he got into coaching basketball because of Verdell.



Verdell Robinson with Duke head men's basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski. Robinson and Mike Krzyzewski played on the same post team when both were stationed at Fort Carson, Colorado.

PROVIDED

"He showed me how to coach and how to talk to kids and how to bond," said Denard, 40, who just completed his third season as an assistant with Stonewall Jackson High School's girls basketball team. "I learned a lot from him."

Basketball was central to the Robinson household. Verdell was a small forward for the University of Charleston (W.Va.) and played for and with Duke University head coach Mike Krzyzewski on the same post team when both were stationed at Fort Carson, Colo.

Verdell also spent seven seasons as Manassas Park High School's boys basketball coach.

His son, Justin, was a four-year point guard at Virginia Tech. He averaged 13.5 points and 5.0 assists a season ago in

helping the Hokies reach the Sweet 16 for the first time since 1967. He finished his career as Virginia Tech's all-time assists leader.

Justin signed with the Washington Wizards last year as an undrafted rookie free agent. He played in nine games this season with the Wizards before being waived Jan. 5. He signed with the Delaware Blue Coats, the NBA G League affiliate of the Philadelphia 76ers.

In addition to guiding his sons, Verdell helped others develop their skills and character. Denard said two former Manassas Park players said how much Verdell meant to them and how he helped them get their lives together.

"There were a lot of responses of how he impacted their lives," Denard said.

# Still open and hopeful

## Day-care owner, mom of three confronts challenges

» BY EMILY SIDES  
esides@insidenova.com

Manassas resident Yasmeen Rahman said her day care, Hoadly Playroom in Manassas, was officially full with a dozen kids enrolled in early March.

As concerns about the spread of the coronavirus grew, leading schools in the state to close through the end of the academic year, Rahman said her enrollment has dwindled to four children on most days.

Because the business is her only source of income, Rahman said she's worried but is still open for essential workers who need child care.

"I've been in child care since 2004," she told InsideNoVa on Monday. "I've never experienced anything like this at all."

She said some of her day-care clients are still paying even though their child isn't attending and they are promoting her day care to essential workers.

"I feel blessed for loyal parents," she said.

She said she tries to look at the situation optimistically.

"It came out of nowhere and it's uncharted waters," she said. "I know everybody is in the same boat. We're all trying to do the best thing we can with what we have."

Rahman's oldest child, a college sophomore, is spending the downtime vol-

unteering as a tutor online. "I've always taught my kids to give back," she said.

Her two younger children at Colgan High School are completing assignments online and reading.

"I've told them it's not a long summer," she said. "Even if it's not graded, still continue. It's been challenging trying to get them on the internet and share a laptop."



YASMEEN RAHMAN

School division officials have proposed spending \$10 million to get every high school student a laptop.

Rahman said the proposal would be tremendous. "They could both work at the same time instead of coming up with timetables to share."

She said the experience has brought her family closer.

In a Facebook group, a neighbor posted they couldn't find any eggs, so Rahman said she dropped off a dozen eggs. She also posts online where she sees chicken, hand soap and other sought-after items as store workers and others work to restock shelves.

"My heart goes out to everybody," she said.

# Helping her crew

## Restaurant manager focused on aid for her 49-person team

» BY JARED FORETEK  
jforetek@insidenova.com

When she was laid off from her general manager position at Not Your Average Joe's restaurant in Woodbridge, Carla Thompson says her first thought wasn't even about herself. She was more concerned with her 49-person staff, people who'd be losing their jobs, as well.

"Three had babies in the last couple months, five were in the process of planning a wedding, I have one staff member whose husband was laid off in December," Thompson said. "I have a staff member who's in nursing school and has a young daughter and just found out she's pregnant. Nobody's in a situation where this is a good time to lose their job."

Since March 17, when the restaurant shuttered and the staff was laid off, Thompson had time to think about her own circumstances. She's filed for unemployment, but hasn't yet been approved (she said the process took roughly 40 minutes and was fairly straightforward), but the 32-year veteran of the restaurant industry says she'll be fine. It's still her staff that worries her the most.

She quickly started a GoFundMe, soliciting donations for the employees who've lost their income. With so many in need, though, and so many others strapped for

cash, it didn't take off like she'd hoped. Still, on Monday, she was happy to distribute what she'd raised. Forty of the staff members came to the restaurant to pick up \$36 each.

"It's not a lot, but obviously they need it," Thompson says.

The hope amongst the staff is that this will all be temporary. Two employees Thompson knows of have already filed for and received unemployment benefits. Others are looking for work elsewhere, many in the hope that they will work part time or leave when the restaurant reopens.

Thompson checks in with a number of employees via text every day, and she said everyone's been assured that if the restaurant reopens fully staffed, they can have their old jobs back.

"I don't think there's anybody in the country who isn't concerned about the future right now. I never thought I'd see a point like this in the United States where everything is shut down and restaurants are pretty much non-existent," Thompson said. "But we're a little family-oriented neighborhood restaurant. I keep in contact with them ... All I'm trying to do is keep them emotionally together and letting them know there's a light at the end of the tunnel."



CARLA THOMPSON