

Saltville culinary student's sweet dreams come true despite pandemic

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SPORTS » C1

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Trump downplays Russia on hacking campaign

BY JILL COLVIN and MATTHEW LEE
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Contradicting his secretary of state and other top officials, President Donald Trump on Saturday suggested without evidence that China — not Russia — may be behind the cyber espionage operation against the United States and tried to minimize its impact.

In his first comments on the breach, Trump scoffed at the focus on the Kremlin and downplayed the intrusions, which the nation's cybersecurity agency has warned posed a "grave" risk to government and private networks.

"The Cyber Hack is far greater in the Fake News Media than in actuality. I have been fully briefed and everything is well

See **TRUMP**, Page A7

Battle over Fed powers stalls \$900B aid package

BY ANDREW TAYLOR and CHRISTOPHER RUGABER
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — An arcane battle over emergency Federal Reserve powers foiled efforts on Saturday to lock down an agreement on an almost \$1 trillion COVID-19 economic relief package. The deadlock was just the latest stumble in a partisan, months-long fight over pandemic relief and the lack of progress is backing lawmakers once again up against a government shutdown deadline Sunday night.

Lawmakers on both sides said a provision by Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., that would curb

See **AID**, Page A7

INSIDE A COVID-19 INTENSIVE CARE UNIT



DAVID CRIGGER/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Ballad Health Chaplain Michelle Lambert prepares to enter a room on the COVID-19 ICU ward at Holston Valley Hospital in Kingsport.

'No COVID patient dies alone'



DAVID CRIGGER/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Ballad Health Chaplain Michelle Lambert sanitizes her hands after leaving a patient's room in the COVID-19 ICU ward at Holston Valley Hospital in Kingsport.

Hospital chaplain describes heartbreaking work of caring for COVID-19 patients

BY SARAH WADE | BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

KINGSPORT, Tenn. — You can tell how often Michelle Lambert has already prepared to enter a patient's room in C300, the COVID-19 intensive care unit at Holston Valley Medical Center, by watching her hands: They fly through the process without hesitation. ♦ At 4:20 p.m. Tuesday, Lambert, a chaplain at the Kingsport hospital, deftly slipped a plastic gown over her cardigan, doubled the straps around her back and knotted them in front. She snapped two latex gloves over each hand. Atop the N95 mask she was already wearing, she secured a surgical mask. She tucked her blonde bob into a bouffant cap. She wiped down a plastic face shield, slid the strap over her head and pulled it tight with a series of loud clicks.

See **CHAPLAIN**, Page A4



ONLINE

Watch video of Ballad Health chaplain Michelle Lambert with this story at HeraldCourier.com.

Thank you, **Larry Taylor**, for subscribing to the Bristol Herald Courier.



INSIDE

'Do as I say': Anger as some politicians ignore virus rules. **A6**



LOCATION	#CASES	#DEATHS
Worldwide	76,199,100+	1,683,900+
United States	17,631,200+	316,000+
Virginia	302,972	4,643
Tennessee	503,651	5,960

SOURCES: Johns Hopkins, Virginia and Tennessee Departments of Health, AP

Tenn. first lady tests positive; Lee to address state on surge

BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee's wife, Maria, has tested positive for COVID-19, according to a Saturday evening statement from Lee's office.

"Maria began exhibiting mild symptoms of COVID-19 and it was confirmed

this afternoon that she has tested positive," Lee said in the statement. "I am feeling well with no symptoms and have tested negative for COVID-19."

At 8 p.m. EST Sunday, Lee will give a statewide address about the current explosion

of COVID-19 cases in Tennessee, the statement said. His speech will be broadcast on his Facebook page and YouTube channels, and he will deliver it from the Governor's Residence, where he said he is quarantining, according to the statement.

INSIDE: CLASSIFIED E1-4 | COMICS INSERT | DEATHS B2, B6-7 | OPINION A10 | SCOREBOARD C2 | TELEVISION B8

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Chaplain

From Page A1

There. Hidden under layers of blue and green material, Lambert was ready.

She walked to a room labeled 31-E. Behind the glass, an elderly woman lay motionless on a hospital bed, her head thrown back, eyes closed. A tube snaked into her open mouth.

Lambert slipped inside and shut the door, effectively sealing herself in the room of one of the region's sickest COVID-19 patients. She touched the woman with her gloved hand and began saying the Lord's Prayer.

'No COVID patient dies alone'

HVMC is part of Ballad Health's regional hospital system. Because health experts think COVID-19 spreads primarily through close contact, few people besides medical workers are currently allowed inside the network's COVID-19 hospital wards. According to staff, patients with the respiratory illness can only receive visitors when they're clearly dying and have been taken off their respirators.

As a hospital chaplain, Lambert is one of the exceptions. These days, the 47-year-old Blountville resident spends most of her work hours in the facility's COVID-19 ICU, as well as its COVID-19 medical surgical, or "med-surg," unit. (The latter is for less severe cases.)

When she's not working directly with patients, Lambert — who is trained as a nondenominational Christian chaplain — said she's supporting the family members desperate to see them and the nurses and doctors working to keep them alive.

"[Chaplains] provide emotional and spiritual support to all people from all backgrounds," she said of her job. "We visit patients, we provide Bibles on request. ... We're here for traumas. We're here for a lot of spiritual and emotional needs."

That same Tuesday afternoon, in Abingdon, Ballad registered nurse Emily Boucher became the first person in the region to receive a vaccine for the respiratory illness — a signal flare of hope amid the region's current surge of COVID-19 cases. But Ballad leaders have cautioned that distributing the vaccine to everyone in the area could take a while.

Meanwhile, 10 days before Christmas, Lambert said her week was shaping up to be like the previous few: long shifts spent with horribly sick people, sev-



Ballad Health Chaplain Michelle Lambert enters a room on the COVID-19 ICU ward at Holston Valley Hospital in Kingsport. DAVID CRIGGER/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

eral who usually die each day. If anything, Lambert said, she was expecting the case count — and thus the death count — to intensify in the next few weeks.

"I [heard] one nurse compare it to death row one night," Lambert said, standing near a small, artificial Christmas tree, one of the few seasonal decorations in C300. "They come in, but they don't come out."

Some of those people die without family present. When that happens, she said, she and the medical staff step in, staying with each patient until the end.

"Our mission is ... no COVID patient dies alone," Lambert said.

'I felt a call to the COVID unit'

The COVID-19 intensive care unit at HVMC is a long, narrow floor with patient rooms running down either side. It can accommodate up to 15 patients at a time, according to Adnan Brka, director of critical care. The floor now has several temporary health care workers assisting his employees; they're part of a group of about 35 such workers recently deployed to the region's hospitals by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, he said.

Everything in the unit is set up to minimize contact with the patients. The rooms are fronted with glass, allowing staff to monitor the sick from a medical station in the floor's center. A special ventilation system creates negative air pressure inside each one, causing air to flow in but not out. And the patients' IVs are positioned in the hallway, with the tubes snaked under the doors.

Still, Lambert said, she and the medical staff sometimes spend hours at a time by patients' bedsides.

Her visit to the woman in 31-E that day lasted just a few minutes. After leaving, Lambert pulled off the gown, gloves, surgical mask, cap and face shield, tossing all but the latter into a trash can. The patient hadn't given any sign that she was aware of the company, Lambert said. But the chaplain said she finds that "a lot of people at the end of life can still hear you."

A short, quiet woman who seems more comfortable listening than speaking, Lambert is one of several chaplains at Holston Valley. She said she's been spending most of her time in the hospital's COVID-19 units since mid-September, when she volunteered to take on that role.

"I felt a call to the COVID unit," she said.

Connecting with the sick and dying

Lambert has found a variety of ways to support patients and their family members in the past three months. She said that earlier in the fall, when staff were trying to conserve the personal protective equipment needed to enter patients' rooms, she wrote encouraging notes and prayers on a dry erase board and held it up to their windows.

"We've had patients that have remembered that and told their families about it," Penny VanHuss, a critical care nurse manager who oversees C300's nursing team, said of Lambert's messages.

But now, because family visits are so limited, Lambert said she enters the rooms often and does

whatever she can to comfort the patients.

One woman, who nearly died from COVID-19 and whose husband did die from it, couldn't see her stepson in person because he was in the Sullivan County jail. Lambert said she helped the woman

have what she thought would be her last phone call with him.

There was the dying man who cried with relief when Lambert came to talk with him, and simply asked her for prayer. Inside the room of a woman hospitalized with COVID-19, Lambert

said, she held an improvised memorial service for the woman's husband, who had just died after also being hospitalized with the illness.

And there was the woman who died an agonizingly slow death after talking with her children by video one final time. Lambert said she sat with the woman for six hours. "Sometimes, they gasp for breath," Lambert said of dying patients. "It's a horrifying death."

VanHuss said that Lambert clearly has a gift for the work.

"Patients love her. ... She has a very calming effect on them," VanHuss said. "She will sit in a room and talk to patients. ... She will help keep their mind off things and keep them entertained ... She has played board games [and] cards with them."

VanHuss said the chaplain also regularly assists the nurses with nonmedical tasks. Often, she said, it's Lambert who sets up the virtual visits between patients and their family members and makes sure both sides can see and hear each other.

See **COVID**, Page A5

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COVID

From Page A4

And when family members of a dying COVID-19 patient arrive at the hospital for one final visit, Lambert is frequently the one to greet them in the lobby, bring them to the unit and keep them company if they request it, she said.

"For ICU staff, chaplains have always played a huge role in what we do, in the challenges that we see, the overwhelming amount of trauma that we see," VanHuss said. "The staff is very up front about how incredible they think [Lambert] is."

At times, the COVID-19 ICU can be eerily quiet. Late in the afternoon that Tuesday — a day when two COVID-19 patients died, Lambert later said — there was little sound in C300 apart from the discordant beeping of IV pumps and heart monitors.

But Lambert said the atmosphere can quickly become intense. Recently, she said, she was comforting family members of a patient who was dying on one side of the floor. On the opposite side, a Catholic priest was delivering last rites for another dying patient by video call. The body of yet another person who had just died was visible in a different room, she said.

Amid all of that, Lambert said, two patients from the med-surg unit were suddenly brought into the ICU to be intubated because they couldn't breathe. Then, through a different entrance, a team dressed in white protective suits rushed in a patient on a ventilator from another hospital.

"The nurses were just going everywhere and

they were intubating these patients, trying to save their lives," Lambert said. "And we have someone who passed here, another almost gone here, another — it was just like a war zone. A war zone."

'I see it in their eyes'

Lambert said that she's not the only employee trying to comfort HVMC's COVID-19 patients. On top of keeping up with patients' physical needs, she said, the nurses, doctors and other medical staff are laboring to make them feel seen and loved.

If a patient is about to die and their family can't visit, Lambert said, sometimes their family members ask the staff to convey messages to them.

"The nurse will go in and say it to them. 'Your wife just called. She wants you

to know that she loves you. It's OK to go. We're here for you,'" Lambert said, recalling one message. "It's unreal, the care that they provide."

The patient Lambert sat with for six hours received a lot of care from one particular nurse, she said.

"[That nurse] would come in and call her by name and stroke her hair and say, 'Your daughter loves you and she wants you to know that she loves you,'" Lambert recalled. "The nurse continuously reminded her that her son and daughter loved her. She talked about [the woman's] pearl earrings, how pretty they were."

It's heavy, heartbreaking work, and Lambert — whose role includes supporting the staff — said she sees the price of it every day.

"I pray with the staff, emotionally support them ... listen to them," she said. "I see it in their eyes. I see grief, I see exhaustion. I see love."

Many employees have sacrificed their holidays and worked overtime to care for the hospital's sickest COVID-19 patients, she said. Sometimes they run out of time for lunch.

"If they do get to eat, they're literally standing up, [because] the COVID unit is just so fast-paced," Lambert said. "There's so many [patients] coming in."

'It's in your bones'

Lambert said she's been with at least 30 COVID-19 patients as they died in the past three months. That's an estimate; she said she stopped counting at 20.

"I've never seen that

many bodies at one time," she said. "I've seen death and I've seen suffering, I've seen trauma. I've seen a lot. But I've never seen anything like this."

Seeing the pandemic's deadliest cases firsthand has made her "hyper-vigilant" about wearing a mask and following other COVID-19 safety protocols, she said. And she's repeatedly told friends and family to do the same.

But Lambert said that every day she hears about more and more people she knows catching the illness. Many experience mild or moderate symptoms at worst. Others, as Lambert knows too well, won't be so lucky, and she said it seems like the number of patients in Holston Valley's COVID-19 units keeps rising.

Lambert said she thinks her own faith has grown

stronger amid the immense challenges of caring for COVID-19 patients. She said she feels closer to God, and she's holding tightly to her hope in Christianity's promise of new life after death.

Sleep has become a struggle, though. Lambert said it's gotten harder for her to wind down at home after a shift. Some nights, she can't stay asleep. It's not fear or worry keeping her up, Lambert said: It's an urge to go back to the COVID-19 wards and keep supporting staff and patients.

"It's hard to leave it all [there] and not take any of it home with you," she said. "It's in you. It's in your bones. It's in your DNA once you're there with a patient."

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