
NURSES



— THE **H**EART OF HEALTH CARE —

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THE FREE LANCE-STAR

— TANYA SINGLETON —

‘BABY WHISPERER’ IS DEDICATED TO BRINGING INFANTS INTO THE WORLD

BY ERIC ALTHOFF
FOR THE FREE LANCE-STAR

By her own admission, Tanya Singleton was “fascinated by all things birth” during her formative years growing up in rural Alabama. She watched as the neighbors’ dogs delivered puppies, and in her teens began working part-time in a local health clinic.

“There were still homebirth midwives—what we call ‘granny midwives’ down south—that delivered babies,” Singleton recalls, adding that soon she shadowed doctors and the midwives to assist in home deliveries in rural Greene County.

She was accepted into the University of Alabama’s nursing program, and knew this had to be her vocation.

“The doctors are literally there to ‘catch and run,’ ” during a baby’s delivery, Singleton said. “Nurses spend the most time with patients, and that’s what I wanted to do. I like helping them learn what to do with their babies. Nursing was where I needed to be!”

Singleton continued to develop her labor and delivery skills as an officer in the Army Nurse Corps. Her final active-duty stationing was in Virginia, and rather than relocate the family again upon her retirement, Singleton and her husband decided to remain in the commonwealth as she transitioned into the reserves.

“We liked Virginia, we enjoyed the school system for the kids ... and that was more important than continuing my military career,” Singleton said.

She attained two master degrees from Liberty and George Washington universities, and not only continued birthing and lactation



MIKE MORONES / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Tanya Singleton aims to give babies and their mothers a healthy start.

coaching at patients’ homes, but also offered online classes for expectant mothers both near and far. She even has a website called “The Baby Whisperer,” which offers rather specific services such as “maternal breast assessment,” “sibling preparation assistance” and “infant oral anatomy and sucking assessment.”

When the pandemic hit last spring, Singleton, who was already in semi-retirement, moved even more of her instruction online. However, she believed firmly that certain birthing and breastfeeding coaching must still take place in person, especially as expectant mothers’ social circles were necessarily curtailed and the number of relatives allowed to be present for support all but cut off.

“It was heartbreaking to me because people didn’t even have their ‘villages’ of support during lockdown, Singleton said. “Moms depend on other moms a lot for support.”

Whereas before COVID-19 she would go to the homes of new par-

ents and parents-to-be perhaps four times a day, she reduced such in-person consultations to one household daily. She and her patients were careful with masks and gloves and temperature checks to better prevent the virus’s spread.

“I do have a bag like the old doctors that did home visits,” she said, adding that in addition to medical tools, she also totes around various teaching devices.

In addition to her once-daily home visits, Singleton follows up with virtual meetings, doing her best to explain from afar lactation techniques and other procedures.

In addition to the challenges posed by virtual health care, Singleton also provides a shoulder for clients to share with her the financial burdens associated with childbirthing and care—a situation that has only been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Singleton’s own children are spread out across the country and in Europe. She misses her family greatly, and says she and her husband will soon drive a recently purchased

BACKGROUND

OCCUPATION:

Registered nurse, lactation consultant, counselor

EDUCATION:

Bachelor’s in nursing, University of Alabama; master’s of public health, George Washington, and master’s in counseling, Liberty University

AREA OF FOCUS:

Maternal-child health, childbirth and parenting education, postpartum depression and trauma

YEARS OF SERVICE:

40

camper to visit some of the grandchildren in Michigan. Then they will continue west to sunny California.

“Because I haven’t had the opportunity to be around my grandchildren, it helps to be in the home with the ‘littles’ and their moms to work through their challenges,” she said.

In the “before” times, Singleton’s husband acted as her informal agent, often walking up to women on the street to hand them her business card. This invariably led to some embarrassing moments when her husband approached women who weren’t pregnant, but Singleton laughs it off.

“Education and support is critical for a mom’s well-being more so than the baby’s because babies are very resilient,” Singleton said of her trade. “Just knowing that you’re [teaching] the basic [correct technique] is enough to give them a healthy start.”

Nursing was where I needed to be! —TANYA SINGLETON

— GERALDINE FORD —

MARY WASHINGTON NURSE EMBRACES NEW ROLES DURING PANDEMIC

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Geraldine Ford has been a registered nurse at Mary Washington Hospital for more than three decades. She's experienced a lot, but she never thought she would be working through a viral pandemic.

"It never crossed my mind," said Ford, 55.

Suddenly, Ford was not only working as a nurse under confusing, chaotic conditions, but had also become the COVID-19 expert for a network of Baptist churches in Virginia.

"Information was changing constantly," said Ford. "Our pastor [Charles Wormley at Mount Zion Baptist Church in Spotsylvania] told me, when the pandemic first started, 'OK, Geri, I need you to get up and give updates to the church,' so I did that, not knowing it would be a whole year and I would still be doing this weekly."

Those weekly updates led to Ford being invited by Wormley to give a presentation at a virtual COVID-19 summit held by the Mattaponi Baptist Association of Virginia, which has 72 member churches.

"That was successful, so from that a pastor asked me to do a monthly update," Ford said. "The best way I thought I could do that was through a monthly newsletter, so starting in January, I have sent newsletters on COVID-19 to the whole association."

With her new role as a COVID-19 liaison to her community added to her job as a full-time nurse, Ford is busier now than she has ever been before, but she never considered stepping away from any of it.

"I went into nursing not to sit at



PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Geri Ford has worked at Mary Washington Hospital for 37 years.

home, but to take care of people," she said. "It has been scary, but you trust in the scientists, you trust in your faith in the Lord and you just got to do what you have to do.

"I'm not of the age to retire, but even if I could have retired, I would not have when there is such a need," she continued. "I just couldn't do it."

Ford began studying to be a nurse during her senior year of high school in Fredericksburg. She got an associate's degree from Germanna Community College and then completed a bachelor's of nursing program online through Old Dominion University.

She has worked at Mary Washington Hospital for her entire career, 37 years and counting.

Ford said she was drawn to nursing because she has always been a helper.

"Anything I can do for someone, I'm there," she said.

Ford spent many years working in the oncology unit and had moved to endoscopy when the pandemic

struck last year.

As an endoscopy nurse, Ford was caring for people who were in the hospital for outpatient procedures. She said it was shocking when the hospital suddenly halted all outpatient procedures in March 2020.

"One day, we have cases and the next day, no cases," she recalled. "Oh, my God, it was really scary. The whole hospital, everything went down. Everything was just hanging in the air."

With no patients to care for, Ford spent some time working the hospital's COVID-19 call center. That experience helped her learn how to make sense of the rapidly evolving information coming down from national public health experts about the virus and how to distill it for a broader public audience—skills she's used ever since in her role as de facto COVID liaison and now, vaccine ambassador for her church community.

"There is a lot of hesitancy about [the vaccine]," Ford said. "Some

BACKGROUND

OCCUPATION:

Registered nurse at Mary Washington Hospital

EDUCATION:

Germanna Community College; bachelor's in nursing, Old Dominion.

AREA OF FOCUS:

Oncology, endoscopy

YEARS OF SERVICE:

37

of it is, you've got to be respectful of how people feel. Several of our members were hesitant about it and once they got information, they've taken [the shot]. We're not there yet, but we're getting there. It's just about making sure people get the right information and we find the root of what's going on."

Ford can quickly point to what she misses about pre-pandemic life—not being able to get together with her family at holidays or for catch-ups with her sisters and girlfriends—but she's also found much to be thankful for, like being able to spend more time with Anthony, her husband of 20 years, and the "overwhelming, in a good way" outpouring of support for front-line nurses from the community.

"People find out you're a nurse and they say, 'Thank you so much, thank you so much,'" she said. "And it's not like you want anybody doing anything big, but you know, it really feels good to your heart when somebody says, 'Thank you,' because this is what I want to do. I want to help."

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I went into nursing not to sit at home, but to take care of people. —GERI FORD

— MARTHA HEINS —

NURSE FINDS 'PERFECT FIT' HELPING PATIENTS AT WEIGHT LOSS CENTER

BY JAMES SCOTT BARON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Martha Heins was preparing for an influx of patients to her new project as the region struggled with the coronavirus outbreak. She was helping to open Mary Washington Healthcare's Weight Loss Center with Dr. Denis Halmi in May 2020.

Although COVID-19 was taking its toll on local offices, restaurants and businesses, forcing them to close, the practice offering bariatric surgery was just starting to boom, and there has been a steady stream of patients ever since.

"We have been swamped," said Heins.

Heins, who screens and prepares patients for surgery, said the center has exceeded all expectations. She said over the last year, Halmi went from performing surgeries two Wednesdays each month to performing surgeries every Wednesday plus two Tuesdays each month.

"So, he has kind of tripled what he started with," said Heins. "We've already outgrown our space. We are very, very blessed."

Heins said each patient requires 10 appointments at the center before, during and after surgery. She credits modern technology in helping the staff keep those appointments with patients throughout the pandemic.

Like many medical offices over the last year, the Weight Loss Center continued business operations by conducting patient interviews remotely. The process required the medical staff and the patients to adapt to the new technology



MIKE MORONES / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Martha Heins says working with patients at Mary Washington Healthcare's Weight Loss Center is the most rewarding job she's had.

required to communicate over the internet. Heins said learning the untraditional way to do business was initially a challenge, but everyone eventually adapted and became proficient in the new routine.

"And that's the good part about it, it's just a different way. It's an opportunity to learn technology, which is always a challenge, not only for the patient, but at times, for us, too," said Heins. "I'm grateful that we were able to help our patients virtually. People need to be treated, they need care, whether we have this pandemic or not."

Heins, who worked with Halmi for three years before the center opened, said Mary Washington Healthcare originally approached Halmi and asked him to create a new weight loss center. She said the two worked together to build the center from the ground up.

Heins, a registered nurse, spent 12 years in a New York City hospital

and another 16 years at the Sentara Northern Virginia Medical Center. She also served at the Surgi-Center of Virginia in Fredericksburg. She said her MBA degree was a huge plus in helping her bring the new center to life.

"This job is the perfect fit for me," said Heins. "I am able to utilize my MBA in running the weight loss center and use my nursing degree and medical experience in caring for patients."

Since the center first opened, the two surgeons have performed about 80 bariatric surgeries. Six other people also work the center, including a dietician and a part-time behavior coach. A clerical staff helps patients coordinate screenings, training and appointments.

"We do a lot of teaching and screening preoperatively and postoperatively," said Heins. "We also help patients navigate through the insurance obstacles."

BACKGROUND

OCCUPATION:

Registered nurse,
practice manager

EDUCATION:

Bachelor's degree in nursing from State University of New York at Plattsburgh, N.Y., and a master's degree in business administration from Pace University, New York City.

AREA OF FOCUS:

Bariatric surgery

YEARS OF SERVICE:

Over 25

Heins said the center focuses on a segment of the population that's oftentimes overlooked or shunned. But in a world that Heins said is "looks conscious," she calls her role in helping patients at the weight loss center the most rewarding job she's ever had.

Heins, a Fredericksburg resident, said working at full speed through the pandemic was a challenge, but the staff continues to meet patient demands as the pandemic slowly begins to recede.

"The fact that we can get them the care they need, it is the most gratifying thing in the world to me, because they are so grateful, just so grateful that we're helping them," said Heins.

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I'm grateful that we were able to help our patients virtually.
People need to be treated, they need care, whether we have this pandemic or not.

—MARTHA HEINS

— SHANTEE WASHINGTON —

NURSE MANAGER AT LONG-TERM FACILITY RETURNED TO CONNECT WITH PATIENTS

BY ROB HEDELT
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

It didn't take Shantee Washington long to connect with the elderly at her first job at a long-term care facility in Manassas.

That was more than two decades ago, and now she is the director of nursing at the Northern Neck Senior Care Community in Warsaw. Washington can trace her nursing career to the close relationship she had with her grandmother growing up in Warrenton.

"I guess it started there, but I've always had a love for the elderly," said Washington, who lives in Port Royal and has been at her current job since the fall. "For them, and for all we provide nursing care for, I think our job is about the connections we create with those we serve. That comes from listening and spending time with them, getting to know what they need and want. And to show that you care."

Washington said COVID-19 posed challenges for her facility, with an outbreak and loss of life happening a few months before she took her job there. She left Heritage Hall in King George County just before the pandemic hit, thinking she wanted a change after 21 years in long-term care.

The 48-year-old took a job as a nurse consultant with a pharmacy chain and ended up being forced to do much of that work virtually because of COVID.

"What brought me back was the love of long-term care," she said. "I



MIKE MORONES / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Shantee Washington, nursing director at Northern Neck Senior Care Community, says the center's residents are why she loves her work.

had that break from long-term care, but soon enough knew I wanted to come back to it."

By the time she arrived at the Warsaw facility, it had been through a COVID outbreak that claimed the lives of two residents out of about 80.

She said COVID has changed the world nurses work in, making some afraid enough to leave the field. It's made it difficult to find staff at a time when nurses have even more duties and safety protocols.

"I never really had the fear some have struggled with," she said. "That may be because I always felt like every day I stepped into a facility that I was at risk of getting something. You just get the vaccines and protect yourself the best

you can."

She said there's no doubt that many of the nurses at the Warsaw facility have gone the extra mile during COVID, as every facet of care has become more complicated and demanding.

She said both the residents and staff were thrilled to allow family members to finally come back into the facility to see loved ones. Until now, she said, families have had to make do with talking on the phone, visits through windows or occasional socially distant outdoor gatherings.

"But of course, not all residents could go outside, so it's been hard of them and their families," she said.

Washington said she's harder on one nurse: her daughter, Portia

BACKGROUND

OCCUPATION:

Registered nurse, director of nursing at Northern Neck Senior Care Community

EDUCATION:

ADN from Germanna Community College

AREA OF FOCUS:

Oversees nursing staff, works shift at long-term care and rehab facility in Warsaw

YEARS OF SERVICE:

21

Jones.

"I think she got into this because when she was young, she'd come to visit the facility I worked at before," said Washington. "I don't think she likes that I'm harder on her, but I believe she's a better nurse because of it."

Washington still works shifts on the floor when needed, and said putting a smile on a resident's face is the reason she does the work.

"And it's not usually some big thing that makes them happy," she said. "It's just going in and spending time, and they just start talking about their life. It's why I love doing this work."

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For all we provide nursing care for, I think our job is about the connections we create with those we serve. That comes from listening and spending time with them, getting to know what they need and want. And to show that you care.

—SHANTEE WASHINGTON

— KARLY SILKENSEN —

EVCC INSTRUCTOR 'FELL IN LOVE' WITH NURSING ON DAY 1

READER'S
CHOICE

BY ERIC ALTHOFF
FOR THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Karly Silkensen initially studied nursing on a lark. After graduating high school, she saw an advertisement from a local hospital offering on-the-job training for nursing assistants. Still unsure of what she wanted to do professionally, she gave it a go.

That decision, she now recalls, changed her life.

"My first day on the unit I was assigned, I fell in love," Silkensen said of the start of so much time to come to be spent in health care settings. "I wanted to learn more, to do more and to make a difference in those that were sick. So off to nursing school I went."

Silkensen studied the finer points of nursing at Spotsylvania Vocational Center and Virginia Commonwealth University. In addition to learning how to bind a wound, administer treatment and think on her feet in clinical settings, Silkensen found that she had an innate, inner connection with patients.

"Even if it was just a hand to hold or an ear to listen," she said, "it is a true honor to be able to mend the sick and witness them get better—or even ease their pain and suffering so that they can pass on peacefully."

Silkensen also wished to pass on the knowledge she'd attained to others coming up through nursing programs—to "give back," as she put it.

Accordingly, she teaches at Eastern Virginia Career College to guide the next generation of health care workers. It's a very needed endeavor, as one estimate from Nightingale College posits that by 2030, there will be a nursing shortage of 200,000 professionals as those currently working start to retire.

"Being able to see students light up with excitement when they understand a concept or have successfully completed a skill is truly rewarding,"



MIKE MORONES / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

VCU nurse Karly Silkensen teaches at Eastern Virginia Career College.

Silkensen said of teaching. "I am so fortunate to be doing two things that I love: being a nurse and teaching new nurses."

Silkensen touches a lot of lives in her work as a nurse and an instructor, which may explain why she was selected by the voting public to be honored in The Free Lance—Star's salute to nurses.

For the past year, Silkensen has had to do most of her instruction remotely, while making sure that her two teenage daughters also keep up with their own schoolwork.

According to her colleague Patty McClelland, who nominated Silkensen for recognition, the nursing instructor hasn't let the coronavirus pandemic come between her and those fertile young minds.

"Not only does Karly share her expertise with her students, but also her fellow nurses at VCU," McClelland wrote in her nomination.

"Teaching virtually, via Zoom, [is] a challenge, especially with nursing students," Silkensen said, adding that so many necessary skills require hands-on training.

Plus, she misses interacting with her

charges in person.

"I am an extremely outgoing 'people person' [so] it [has been] a struggle to provide the personal attention deserved to each student," she said. "I had to ensure that our future nurses were well prepared while providing new and innovative ways to get information across."

Things have certainly changed in her clinical practice, too. Silkensen used to drive to work in civilian clothes and then change into scrubs. Now she keeps bleach wipes in her car, along with Lysol spray. Before reentering her house after a shift, she puts herself through a rigorous "decon procedure."

"The unit I work on was not a specific COVID unit, however there were COVID patients admitted on my unit when the COVID units were at capacity," she said of working at VCU and supporting her colleagues during a most unusual year. "There certainly were a lot of close calls as patients were ruled out for COVID."

Silkensen also found connecting with her patients challenging while wearing full PPE. However, she made sure to spend extra time with them, as

BACKGROUND

OCCUPATION:

Registered nurse, Virginia Commonwealth University health care system; nursing instructor/educator, Eastern Virginia Career College

EDUCATION:

Practical nursing, Spotsylvania Vocational Center; associate's degree in nursing, Germanna Community College; bachelor's in nursing, Virginia Commonwealth University

AREA OF FOCUS:

Adult medical/surgery; adult nursing theory; clinical instructor

YEARS OF SERVICE:

21

the realities of COVID-19 kept family members from being at their bedside.

At the same time, she has continued to teach. Her colleague McClelland praised Silkensen's dedication and devotion to her students, adding that she, too, considers Silkensen to be an inspiration.

"The most rewarding moments have been being able to witness the students that I have instructed during this pandemic succeed, pass their state boards and begin their own nursing journey," Silkensen said.

And it's perhaps as important for nurses to care for one another as it for their patients—to help "lighten their load," as she put it.

"As Maya Angelou once said: 'They may forget your name, but they will never forget how you made them feel,'" Silkensen said of her ethos. "I hold that quote close to my heart."

I am so fortunate to be doing two things that I love: being a nurse and teaching new nurses. —KARLY SILKENSEN

— STACY MASON —

ICU NURSE AT MARY WASHINGTON HOSPITAL FILLED NEED WITH STAFFERS' PANTRY

BY ROB HEDELT
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

When COVID-19 hit Mary Washington Hospital where Stacy Mason works in the surgical intensive care unit, she and other nurses found challenges in every shift, from strict new protocols to a ban on visitors.

The Fauquier County resident adopted a regimen of changing clothes in the hospital's parking lot and not touching her two children until showering and washing contaminated clothing. And she began noticing that many hospital staffers were having trouble finding and buying essential products.

Some had lost work hours and money was tight. Others didn't have time after shifts to get into stores with COVID-shortened hours.

"A lot of nurses are parents, and you'd hear them say they couldn't find toilet paper, baby wipes, pull-up diapers or other items," said Mason. "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."

With Mason spearheading the effort, that spirit of caring became a formal program initially known as the Mary Washington Team Pantry. The word "pantry" has been replaced by "cupboard," with the collection earning a dedicated space at the hospital.

The program earned Mason and her co-workers some attention in the community and even from the



MIKE MORONES / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Nurse Stacy Mason, who helped organize a pantry for staff at Mary Washington Hospital, administers a dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

"Rachael Ray" show on television. Mason was interviewed for the show by Ray virtually, and was surprised to hear the show was donating \$10,000 and a raft of cleaning products to the pantry.

Mason said one positive aspect of COVID is that it "showed us the true sense of community, in the hospital and area as a whole. People stepped up to help others."

That spirit lasts in the efforts of the Team Cupboard, with people in the hospital and community continuing to buy and donate items for hospital staffers whose families are economically challenged by the pandemic.

While part of the need for the cupboard had to do with convenience, Mason said these days, "It's absolutely about associates in need." The people running it try to see what's needed and fill gaps

in donations with the Rachael Ray funding.

Things such as diapers, wipes, paper towels and simple food items are always in demand. Taco kits have become popular lately.

Mason spends much of her time in the effort picking up donations.

"It really is my joy, and I get a kick out of doing it," said Mason, noting that her children (Sutton and Lila) "are learning something from helping. They love helping me with the pick-ups."

Mason said that soon after COVID hit, she and husband Chad, who works as a first responder, discussed how to square the need for their work with keeping their family safe.

She said that while some nurses and first responders were sending their children to live with grandparents to keep them safe, they

BACKGROUND

OCCUPATION:

Registered nurse at Mary Washington Hospital

EDUCATION:

Bachelor's degree in nursing from VCU

AREA OF FOCUS:

Surgical intensive care unit

YEARS OF SERVICE:

12 years

didn't really have that option.

"My husband and I had a difficult conversation," she said, noting that they felt it important to do their jobs. So they came up with the best safeguards they could fashion and have stuck to them.

Mason said she didn't regularly work on COVID wards this past year, but did fill in there when necessary. She came to realize "how hard my superhero co-workers had it each and every day."

She said it was particularly difficult to see the very ill patients who had to cope without their families and friends.

"I now see the fragility of life a bit more," she said. "I certainly saw it previously working in the ICU, but COVID made it more of a front-leading thought. It's made me think about how we live out our best life, as we do only have a limited amount of time in life."

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I now see the fragility of life a bit more.
I certainly saw it previously working in the ICU,
but COVID made it more of a front-leading thought.

—STACY MASON

— BRANDY STEPANIAK —

MANAGER USES SKILLS IN NURSING, TECHNOLOGY TO LEAD LOCAL VACCINE CLINIC

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

During local meetings or press conferences with the governor, the vaccination clinic at the Fick Conference Center in Fredericksburg has been called as efficient as a Chick-Fil-A drive-thru.

One reason for its success may be the nurse who volunteered to help in the early going, then quickly became its manager. That's Brandy Stepaniak, and she's well-versed in nursing informatics, a field that combines the clinical side of treating patients with the information technology aspect of computer science.

The skill set means Stepaniak can vaccinate people who come to the clinic on the campus of Mary Washington Hospital or help co-workers with a computer glitch. She regularly does both—and more, said Jill Wolf, a fellow nurse who wanted to see Stepaniak's efforts recognized.

"Brandy is a great manager in that she jumps right in and helps," said Wolf, who volunteers in the clinic because of the fast-paced and friendly atmosphere. "I have seen her register patients, vaccinate, check out. Even on a cold day in February, I saw her out working in the parking lot helping get people in the queue to come in."

Stepaniak has been an integral part of the clinic's success, said Dr. Christopher Newman, chief medical officer of Mary Washington Healthcare. "When I've been in there volunteering, it seems that she's in five different places simultaneously. She's just been fantastic," he said.

The clinic opened on a Tuesday in January after a small group gathered the Friday before to hash out details. It has expanded to six days a week, 13.5 hours a day, staffed by



MIKE MORONES / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Brandy Stepaniak oversees operations at MWHC's vaccine clinic.

volunteers from all sectors of the hospital, as well as the community. The clinic started with an initial goal of 1,200 doses per day and by mid-April had doubled that.

Stepaniak, 39, is humbled, both by the work around her and the chance to be part of it. She grew up in King George County and became the first in her immediate family to graduate from high school and college. She regularly mulls over clinic operations, even when she's not there.

"I think, wow, look at what we've done as a team, as a community, as a health care group," she said. "I'm proud that I can go home and not have to worry about the clinic because it's so well run and so self-efficient. So many people come in and they own it."

"Every volunteer that we have just loves it. They say, 'This is our baby, too,' and they just love being here. They make it their own."

Before COVID-19, Stepaniak primarily dealt with electronic health records—patient information stored in a digital format. She had worked at other locations and as a contractor for MWHC until she joined Mary Washington Hospital as a full-time

employee in March 2020.

Always a fan of projects, she took on her first soon after the pandemic hit and patients were reluctant to visit doctors. Stepaniak and two others developed a system so the more than 30 practices affiliated with MWHC could offer telemedicine, or virtual visits.

She helped in other areas until December, when MWHC began vaccinating staff against the virus. When the effort expanded to the public, she noticed more help was needed in the clinic.

"I kind of offered, 'Hey, I can come in and help with the mornings,'" Stepaniak said, and the next thing she knew, she was asked to be interim manager.

She credits the team for the smooth operations—for an efficient system that starts when vehicles enter the parking lot of the Fick center and continues as people are quickly ushered through various stations for temperature and identification checks, registration and the vaccination itself. Often, people are in and out in less than 20 minutes, which includes a brief observation period.

Stepaniak incorporates ideas and

BACKGROUND

OCCUPATION:

Interim manager of vaccine clinic operations at Mary Washington Healthcare, she's typically a clinical specialist in electronic health records.

EDUCATION:

Nursing degree from Germanna Community College; bachelor's in nursing from American Sentinel University

AREA OF FOCUS:

Nursing informatics, which combines clinical care with computer and information sciences.

YEARS OF SERVICE:

11

suggestions from others on how to improve the process. Some volunteers said they had messy writing and couldn't neatly note information on patient vaccination cards. They asked if preprinted labels could be used, and Stepaniak put a system in place to do just that.

Her longtime friend, Heather Roche, called her an amazing person and nurse, a mother of three and a professional with "a strong desire to do the right thing by the patient or end user."

"Brandy has a big heart for her community," Roche said. "She's usually the first person to say, 'How can I help?'"

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I think, wow, look at what we've done as a team, as a community, as a health care group. —BRANDY STEPANIAK

— JANET JENSEN —

INSPIRED BY 9/11, SPOTSYLVANIA NURSE BRINGS PASSION TO JOB

BY SCOTT SHENK
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Like it did with so many others in the United States, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks changed Janet Jensen's life.

On Sept. 11, 2001, the Spotsylvania County resident was a legal secretary for a medical malpractice office just four blocks from the Pentagon. She heard the explosion when the passenger plane crashed into the nearby Department of Defense headquarters.

"It was terrible," Jensen said.

That day, she decided to become a nurse, Jensen said in a recent interview at Spotsylvania Regional Medical Center, where she is a certified wound, ostomy and continence nurse.

Karen Drilling, director of the hospital's rehabilitation services, praised Jensen's approach.

"She fulfills a very specialized role here," Drilling said. "Besides being very smart, she's just got a very caring nature."

Jensen is a Maryland native who has lived in Spotsylvania for 30 years. She and her 15-year-old son live on a small farm with two pet goats he raised while in 4-H.

She's been a wound care nurse for six years and with the hospital for nine years. Before that, she worked in Bowling Green as a rehabilitation nurse.

Jennings started in orthopedics, but eventually found she was "passionate about" wound care nursing. While she loves the job, it can prove difficult to handle at times.

"I feel like if you didn't have faith in God, you would not be in this profession," Jensen said.

As the 9/11 attacks did, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed Jensen's life, both personally and professionally. Treatment for patients infected with the virus brought problems she and other nurses hadn't dealt with on this level before.

For instance, COVID-19 patients lay face down to expand the lungs, helping them breath better. But this causes

BACKGROUND

OCCUPATION:

Certified wound, ostomy and continence nurse at Spotsylvania Regional Medical Center

EDUCATION:

Certified wound, ostomy and continence nurse program, completed at Emory University

AREA OF FOCUS:

Wound care

YEARS OF SERVICE:

10

flesh wounds to the face.

"The skin was just breaking down," she said, talking about how she and other area nurses networked to find out how to best treat the facial wounds.

Caring for COVID-19 patients also can be like a roller-coaster ride, she said.

"Being in with the patients, seeing them pass, it really touches you personally," Jensen said. "Seeing some survive and come out is just wonderful."

While the hospital now allows family visits, during much of the pandemic COVID-19 patients have been isolated, unable to see family. That spurred Jensen and other nurses to fill a social role for the patients.

"I can't tell you how many pictures I showed of my goats to take their minds off things," she said.

The pandemic also changed her personal life, with Jensen and her son mostly isolating since the outbreak started. She feared catching the virus and spreading it to her other patients at the hospital.

Jensen and her son have started to venture out again, recently enjoying Easter dinner out with her 82-year-old mother, whom Jensen rarely saw during the pandemic.

During that dinner, Jensen realized something.

"I said, 'Oh, it's been so long.'"

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MIKE MORONES / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Janet Jensen, a nurse at Spotsylvania Regional Medical Center, chose her career after 9/11. The pandemic has been another transformative event.



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I feel like if you didn't have faith in God you would not be in this profession. —JANET JENSEN

— AMANDA FRIKKER —

ICU NURSE PROVIDES SUNSHINE, POSITIVITY TO THOSE AROUND HER

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Amanda Frikker has such a positive outlook on life, she can even find something good about a pandemic.

Several things actually. As a charge nurse in the surgical intensive care unit of Mary Washington Hospital, she sees her main goal as making sure the unit runs smoothly and “everyone has the best day they can.” She deals with people recovering after traumas, open-heart or brain surgeries and even gunshot wounds, not virus cases.

But the challenges of COVID-19 have touched everyone around her, and during a meeting last fall with other charge nurses, she noticed a high level of stress—and tears.

As she thought about those who lost loved ones to COVID or cancer and co-workers struggling with day-to-day issues or celebrating happy events like births, Frikker decided to start the “Sunshine Fund.” Team members chip in to buy flowers or goodie baskets for co-workers.

“I think it just brings a little sunshine to their day to say we’re thinking of you, we’re here for you,” she said. “It kind of shows the support of the unit.”

The displays of concern—as well as cookies and chocolates—also make associates feel cared for on a personal level, said Michelle Lemke, an assistant nurse manager in the unit. She lost her stepmother to COVID-19 in December.

“It brought me to tears to see flowers waiting for me with a sweet note when I came home from work one night,” she said. “Amanda is always showing kindness and compassion to everyone she touches.”

As more co-workers have opened up to Frikker with stories of personal issues, the effort has ex-



MIKE MORONES / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Amanda Frikker started a ‘Sunshine Fund’ to show support for and brighten the days of fellow staffers at Mary Washington Hospital.

panded to include groceries and gift cards for those struggling financially.

“We’re helping them, and we’ve really come together as a team,” she said. “I know COVID is an awful thing, but it has brought some positive things.”

She kept the same outlook in her personal life even though she worried, as other health care workers did, about what she might bring home to her family.

Frikker and her husband, Nick, a teacher in Stafford County, are expecting their third child in June. They have a daughter who’s 3 1/2 and a son almost 2.

She was still breastfeeding her son when the pandemic began, so after she finished 12-hour shifts, she went through a routine that became second nature for medical workers last year. She took off her shoes and scrubs outside, joking that “a lot of nurses gave their neighbors a show.” Her husband kept the little ones distracted while

she showered, then she cuddled her babies.

Frikker also savored the time spent in isolation.

“It was literally just us; we did everything together,” she said. “We took walks every night, and I found that it was the best quality time, and I am so grateful for that. My husband and I grew so much as a couple. Even though it was so scary, I found that it was a blessing.”

Frikker has faced plenty of her own struggles. Her father died from a stroke in 2018, followed by the death of her sister from breast cancer three months later. In addition, her mother has dealt with cancer, twice.

“When COVID-19 hit, with as much as she was dealing with personally, she didn’t hesitate to continue working and being there for patients and their families,” said her friend, Kelly Sutherland.

The two went through nursing school together, and Sutherland’s most vivid memory concerns clini-

BACKGROUND

OCCUPATION:

Registered nurse at Mary Washington Hospital

EDUCATION:

Earned nursing and bachelor’s degree from George Mason University in 2011

AREA OF FOCUS:

Surgical intensive care unit. As the charge nurse, she oversees the unit and schedule and helps with patients.

YEARS OF SERVICE:

9

cal rounds when the two noticed a staff member being physically abusive to a patient. The women were just students at the time, but, “Amanda was the first to say this is not right, and we need to report this,” Sutherland said. “If I remember correctly, the individual was fired.”

Sutherland has witnessed her friend continue “to have the most positive outlook on life” no matter what comes her way. She calls Frikker a super woman.

“Amanda wouldn’t think twice about giving you the shirt off her back or holding your hand to give you comfort,” her friend said.

Sutherland has noticed her grumble slightly about one thing. As Frikker’s due date nears, she’s complained that her scrubs are a little tight.

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I know COVID is awful thing, but it has brought some positive things. —AMANDA FRIKKER

— DANA LAWSON —

CARING FOR PATIENTS AMID PANDEMIC INSPIRED LOCAL NURSE 'TO KEEP GOING'

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, Dana Lawson had been questioning whether she really wanted to be a nurse.

She had been so inspired by the support she received from the Mary Washington Hospital nurse who cared for her during the birth of her daughter in 2015 that she applied for nursing school right there in her hospital room.

"I just thought it would be really cool to be that source of support for someone else going through that," said Lawson, 27.

But after graduating from nursing programs at Germanna Community College and the University of Mary Washington, and a little over a year into working as a medical and surgical nurse at Stafford Hospital, Lawson felt bogged down by administrative duties that took time away from the care she wanted to provide.

Then last year, the pandemic struck. When the hospital decided to dedicate the fourth floor to COVID-19 patients only, Lawson was one of the first nurses to volunteer to work there—and the work she did reminded her why she chose the profession.

"During COVID, I had a switch in my brain to start focusing more on the patients and being there for them, and not so much our daily duties as nurses—all the documenting and tedious things we have to do during the shift," she said. "That helped me remember that the whole point is taking care of people."

Lawson said there was a lot of fear among nurses in the chaotic early days of the pandemic.

"I'm not normally one to get scared, but I felt like from how the doctors discussed it, they were scared, and that made me think,



PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Registered nurse Dana Lawson was among the first to volunteer to work with coronavirus patients at Stafford Hospital last spring.

wow, what is this? This is new," she recalled. "No one really knew what to do and information was always changing."

Even though she was scared, Lawson agreed to work on the COVID-19 floor last spring because she knew it would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. For four months, she spent every 12-hour shift on that floor.

During the worst surges, there could be close to 30 COVID patients on that floor, approaching capacity, Lawson said.

She wasn't used to caring for critically ill patients, so she was working harder and learning more than ever before—including how to trust her own skills and instincts.

Housekeeping and dietary staff, as well as many nurse's aides, were not going into the rooms of COVID-19 patients because of safety concerns.

"We were everything for these people," Lawson said. "We would change their linens, bring in their food, clean their rooms, take their

trays out, in addition to treating them. They were very scared. Really, a lot of it was just being there listening to their concerns."

She saw that many patients were worrying about staying in touch with their families in addition to fighting their own illnesses, so she tried to take that burden away.

"Getting the family involved was what I liked to do to reassure [my patients]," Lawson said. "So I would call the family and then the family could let [the patient] relax and try to heal."

She was also often the only person in the room when a patient died. Trying to help them pass over while veiled in alienating layers of PPE was "the hardest part" of the pandemic for her.

"It's just you, and not only just you, but just you with all this stuff on," Lawson said. "There were days when it was more than one [death] in a day. Just one in a day is hard, but for a while, it was a lot. There was a big toll on the floor."

BACKGROUND

OCCUPATION:

Registered nurse at Stafford Hospital

EDUCATION:

Bachelor's degree in nursing, University of Mary Washington; RN, Germanna Community College

AREA OF FOCUS:

Medical/surgical

YEARS OF SERVICE:

3

She got to see patients recover, too, and getting to meet them without all her PPE on were high points of the year for her.

"I remember taking care of a guy that was positive for a while on the floor, then he tested negative and moved back into the regular patient population," Lawson said. "I got to meet him without all my stuff on and it was really cool, him being like, 'It's you! I can see your hair! And your face!' That stuck with me."

Lawson said she started writing down patient experiences in a diary, so she will always be able to look back and remember the people she cared for and the stories she heard during the pandemic.

"It makes me want to keep going," she said. "I love my patients. The best thing I get to do is meet people and take care of them on their worst days and make them feel better to go home to their families."

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Getting the family involved was what I liked to do to reassure [my patients]. —DANA LAWSON

— NATHAN CASS —

NURSING SUPERVISOR RUNNING AT FULL THROTTLE IN NEW ROLE

BY JAMES SCOTT BARON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Shortly after starting his new job with the Virginia Department of Health as a public health nurse supervisor last February, 30-year-old Nathan Cass found himself vaulting from new employee orientation classes to the region's COVID-19 hotline coordinator.

"I was in orientation as the Health Department was just starting to ramp up and shift focus in anticipation of the coronavirus pandemic," said Cass, whose office is located in the Stafford County Government Center.

Cass, a registered nurse, had just transitioned from a job as a medical facility inspector. Prior to that, he worked for the Health Department inspecting nursing homes and other treatment facilities to ensure they were complying with federal insurance requirements. He also spent a year at Stafford Hospital and worked at Bon Secours St. Francis Medical Center in Midlothian.

Right after coming aboard for his latest role, Cass was asked to start fielding phone calls from an anxious and uncertain public on the risk factors, symptoms and travel restrictions related to COVID-19, which, at that time, was just starting to settle into the Fredericksburg region.

"This was my first time working in a public health role, and my first time in a managerial level," said Cass. "We had a team of people, we were getting information out to the public from the CDC."

Cass knew the telephone was still the most valuable tool many Staf-



PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Public health nurse supervisor Nathan Cass speaks with patients while managing a COVID-19 vaccination clinic in Stafford County.

ford residents had to communicate with someone outside their home due to a lack of broadband in the county. Some residents are aging, homebound or simply lack a computer in their home, he said.

"They knew they could call the Health Department for information and guidance," said Cass.

During the next several weeks, Cass saw his roles and responsibilities in his new job expanding broadly and rapidly, as the intensity of the pandemic increased.

Cass was soon reaching out to local business owners to provide recommendations on how to change or modify their workflows to combat COVID-19.

"If they had a positive case, we'd work with them to help reduce the risk that they have multiple cases," said Cass. "We'd work with the business owner to mitigate the situation to protect the pool of em-

ployees."

Cass kept up the hectic pace until August, when he added occupational health investigations to his daily routine. He continued the grueling schedule until December, when preparations began to administer the COVID-19 vaccination to the public.

"From that point on, I've pretty much been working vaccine clinics as a team leader and as a vaccinator," Cass said. "I also worked with Stafford County Public Schools on a task force with [Superintendent] Scott Kizner to provide guidance and information on when kids could get back to school and the proper mitigation measures required for faculty and students."

Cass said all of the COVID-related efforts he undertook since he took the job came in addition to the regular duties he was originally hired to do, including distributing

BACKGROUND

OCCUPATION:

Public health nurse supervisor, Virginia Department of Health (Stafford office)

EDUCATION:

Bachelor's degree in nursing, Virginia Commonwealth University

AREA OF FOCUS:

Public health

YEARS OF SERVICE:

6

medication to the public and investigating communicable diseases.

"Everything that we would normally do in non-pandemic times is still occurring at some level," said Cass.

Over a year later, Cass is still running at full throttle.

"The pandemic has pretty much shaped my entire experience with the local health department and my job there," said Cass. "Everything I've done so far has been intimately related to it. It's definitely been a sharp learning curve for me."

Cass, a 2008 graduate of Riverbend High School in Spotsylvania County, said the most rewarding part of his job has been his interactions with the community.

"Pretty much every step of my journey so far, I've gotten to work with the broad public, the entire population of our area," said Cass. "But putting vaccines in arms has been most rewarding."

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Putting vaccines in arms has been most rewarding. —NATHAN CASS

SHE MAKES A POSITIVE IMPRESSION ON DAY ONE

Nurse helps deliver gift of motherhood

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

When Robin Javinsky was confined to a hospital bed for 11 weeks, the medical staff around her did everything they could to calm her fears and keep her and her unborn daughter safe.

Complications continued, and Javinsky eventually needed an emergency C-section. Her husband wasn't allowed in the operating room because she had to be put under for the surgery.

Javinsky was scared for her baby. She started to cry. Tammy Eye, one of the nurses in Mary Washington Hospital's labor and delivery department, came to her bedside. Throughout Javinsky's lengthy ordeal, Eye always had "a huge smile, a great conversation and made me feel like I was the most important person to her that day," Javinsky said.

The moment Javinsky dreaded the most was no different. Nurse Eye went into the operating room with her, more for emotional than medical support. She sat beside her, held her hand and spoke soothing words of comfort.

The nurse believes that people under anesthesia can hear what's happening around them, so Eye repeatedly whispered that she was right there with Javinsky, that things were going to be OK, that she was surrounded by people who would take care of her and the baby.

"I fell asleep knowing that the room was filled with love," Javinsky said.

She woke up to discover that little Mollie Jane would have to spend time in the neonatal intensive care unit—five weeks, as it turned out.

All that happened more than six years ago, and the nurse who helped the mom through the scary time has watched on Facebook as Mollie has reached various milestones and started kindergarten. Eye also followed family adventures with Mollie and her three older siblings, and Mollie's parents have kept up with Eye and her activities.

Javinsky, who also works at the hospital in radiation oncology, tries to find the words to describe the birth experi-

ence of her fourth child. She thinks about all the people around her—the nurses, doctors, phlebotomists, ultrasound techs and cleaning staff—who made such a difference just by doing their jobs.

She especially considers the nurse who became her friend.

"I wonder if Tammy truly realizes the difference she makes every day with her positive, happy, outgoing personality," Javinsky said. "Does she realize that while she is delivering excellent care, she is healing hearts, calming worries and comforting patients and their families?"

Eye would say it's all part of a job that seems tailor-made for her skill set and personality.

"I absolutely love what I do. I love bringing life into the world," she said. "I love handing women their babies. It's the most special gift that a woman will ever have in her whole entire life."

Anyone who knows Eye wouldn't be surprised to hear that she started

SEE NURSE EYE, A4

Does she realize that while she is delivering excellent care, she is healing hearts, calming worries and comforting patients and their families?

—ROBIN JAVINSKY

NURSE EYE

► FROM A1

crying when she said that last part. She does the same in the delivery room, shedding tears of joy along with new parents. Sadly, she's also shed some tears of sorrow.

But even then, the Spotsylvania County resident has tried to focus on the principle that motivates her as a nurse.

"I try to treat patients like they're my own family," she said.

'SHE LOVESTO TALK'

Tammy Eye is among those being doubly honored on Mother's Day, which also falls during the middle of National Nurses Week, celebrated May 6–12 this year. To recognize the work of those who have continued to help bring new life into the world, care for others and put their own lives on the line as COVID-19 changed the world around them, The Free Lance—Star is publishing a special section called "Honoring Our Local Nurses."

The section profiles 11 nurses who work in public health and hospitals, Hospice and home health. They were selected from more than 300 nominations submitted by the public.

Eye has already been recognized for her penchant to go above and beyond. She's one of only two nurses who have received the Daisy Award, a recognition for nurses, twice since Mary Washington Healthcare—which operates Mary Washington Hospital and Stafford Hospital—instituted the program in 2011.

Nurses are nominated by patients for the "superhuman work" they do wherever they practice and in whatever role they serve throughout their careers, according to the foundation that created the honor.

"She's a hard worker, she manages the unit great when she's in charge, but she loves the patient care," said Ann Weed, Eye's supervisor and the nurse manager in Labor and Delivery. "She bonds easily with patients, she is able to speak to them on their own in-



MARY WASHINGTON HEALTHCARE

Nurse Tammy Eye, who has helped deliver countless local babies, reviews discharge orders with patient Kristen Friday in Mary Washington Hospital's Labor and Delivery department.

dividual level wherever they're at as far as their experience goes, and she loves to talk. The patients love that."

Eye was in Mary Washington Hospital, delivering her second child, when the nurse tending to her discovered her warm personality. As the two talked and Eye mentioned she also was a nurse—who at the time was employed in a doctor's office after spending a year working in a nursing home—the Labor and Delivery nurse suggested Eye apply for a position there.

About four months later, in June 2002, Eye was hired.

'A JOYOUS TIME'

As soon as patients enter the unit, Eye introduces herself and asks the mom-to-be about her and the baby. What's the theme of the nursery? What's the baby's name? What does she do for a living? As time goes on—and the pain of labor progresses—she asks about where the couple met or other aspects of their lives.

Sometimes she mentions her own children and how she can't wait to be a grandma. Then she laughs and says she's not rushing anyone because Lauren is 21, Austin is 19 and Landon, 15.

"I think just getting to know who they are and where they're from kind of takes their mind

off what's going on pain-wise," Eye said.

When it's time to deliver the baby and the doctor comes into the room, Eye helps the woman count as she makes her final pushes. She rubs the patient's leg and tells her what a great job she's doing.

Once the baby arrives, she helps the infant get out its first cry and the mom have the vital skin-to-skin contact. Eye congratulates the new parents and offers the baby birthday wishes.

"It's definitely very magical, it doesn't matter if it's the first baby or their 10th baby," Eye said.

"The fact that it's a brand new baby, it's beautiful. When the patients deliver and they're crying, I cry right along with them. It's just a joyous time."

'IMPACTED SO MANY'

During an interview, Eye estimated that she probably has watched several hundred babies come into the world. One of Mary Washington's marketing staff who was sitting in on the session did some quick calculations and suggested the total was probably was closer to 3,000 births.

The high numbers wouldn't surprise Lauren Eye, who's always hearing stories from mothers who went through

labor with Nurse Eye at their side.

"Even in school," she said, "I'd be with classmates at banquets or different things and someone would say, 'Oh my gosh, are you Tammy Eye's daughter? Your mom helped deliver my baby.'"

She never tires of their stories because she's proud to hear about the difference her mom made as she helped them become mothers. It's helped shape who she is.

Lauren's younger brother, Austin, has a mild form of cerebral palsy and wasn't able to walk until he was 8. His big sister helped him stand for the first time, gain his balance and then maneuver himself in a walker before he stepped out on his own. Motivated by his experience, Lauren Eye is studying to become a physical therapist who teaches children how to walk.

She's already got the patient-provider aspect down pat, as she seems every bit as warm and bubbly as her mother.

"I learned from my mom how you should treat everyone like family," she said. "She has impacted so many lives and tries her absolute best to be the best nurse she can."

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