



'They didn't think I would live'

Pam Wilson Hudson contracted COVID-19 at a family gathering. She spent 74 days in hospitals and therapy. Doctors didn't know if she would walk again. She knew exactly what was happening. She's a nurse.



PHOTOS SUBMITTED

BY BILL WYATT

bill.wyatt@martinsvillebulletin.com

They told her she wouldn't live. They put her in the intensive-care unit and stuck tubes down her throat. They used machines to breathe for her. They gave her dialysis. There were strokes. They treated her around the clock day after day, and even now, eight months to the day after she tested positive, she continues to fight the effects of COVID-19.

And she knows exactly how to tell her story in frightening and sobering detail. Because she's a nurse.

Pam Wilson Hudson endured a remarkable journey into the throes of this disease that has infected millions across the country, hundreds of thousands in Virginia and claimed more than 200 lives right here in her hometown area of Martinsville and Henry County.

Even as she remains in recovery after tests and treatment and rehab and more rehab, she tells a remarkable story that can be instructive to everyone facing the perils of this pandemic. Because of her life's work, her words carry power and poignancy and tender caution.

Hudson, 60, has been a registered nurse for 35 years, employed at the Ravenel Oncology Center at Sovah Health - Martinsville. Who would be better positioned to understand how the near-death experience that became her life.

...

Pam Hudson said her journey with the disease caused by the novel coronavirus began on a family trip in December 2020, in the days before vaccines, when the virus was on its greatest rampage through holiday gatherings and other community events.

"We had traveled to Williamsburg for a long weekend when I got COVID," she said. "And we were so careful. One of us would get out of the vehicle if we wanted to go somewhere and just look in the door to see how crowded it was.

"We didn't go out to eat, and we wore our masks when we had to go out."

But back at a condominium where they were staying, everyone was among family. The masks came off, and everyone relaxed.

And the virus did what it does, grabbing one victim and looking for more and more.

"We didn't wear masks because everybody seemed okay, but we brought it [the virus] with us and didn't know," Hudson said. "Six out of nine of us got COVID, including my husband and youngest daughter, who was 14 at the time."

She recalls that one family member on

COVID-19

From A1

the trip had not been tested for COVID-19 and thought he or she may have had a sinus infection.

"I went to the hospital, and I was tested positive on Dec. 15, and I had mild symptoms for a couple of days, and then it progressed to where I was getting short of breath, and it became more difficult to breathe," Hudson said. "It ended up going into pneumonia. I was keeping in touch with the doctor, and they were texting and telling me what to do.

"I finally got so weak that I couldn't do anything, and they said [for her to] go to the hospital."

•••

Hudson said she spent three days in the COVID-19 unit at Sovah-Martinsville until she was airlifted to the UNC Medical Center in Chapel Hill, N.C., on Dec. 29.

"They didn't think I would live," Hudson said. "When they lifted me out [of the helicopter], I had gotten so bad they had to sedate me."

Doctors placed her on dialysis, even though she had no kidney issues.

"The process helps to clean the poison out of your blood and replenish it," she said. "I've got scars from a PICC line and an arterial line that they had to put in to do the dialysis."

What she couldn't have known was that her battle with the virus only was beginning.

"I stayed on the ventilator for 24 days total," she said. "I was on it 21 days the first time, and then they extubated me [removed the endotracheal tube], and a couple of days later they gave me a swallowing test, and I aspirated."

"And then I coded. They did CPR and put me back on the ventilator."

Hudson also had mini-strokes while the virus ravaged her body, and she said she still suffers from cognitive delays because of them.

"COVID causes clotting, and I had blood clots in my legs, and then I got the mini-strokes because of the clotting," she said. "Sometimes when I speak I can think of what I want to say, but I can't get it out."

•••

Despite the odds, Hudson made slow improvements. After 74 days in the hospital and in-patient therapy, she was declared a COVID-19 survivor.

In February she went to another rehab center for therapy, and finally on March 6 she went home.

But even though she was discharged from the hospital, she was confined to a wheelchair. Doctors didn't



PHOTOS SUBMITTED

Pam Wilson Hudson and her family.

know if she ever would walk again.

"When I got to therapy, I could hardly lift my feet an inch off the bed," Hudson said. "It was a very intense therapy. Every day I worked for three to three and a half hours.

"I told them when I got there [that] my goal was to be able to walk when I left, and I met my goal. I pushed myself everyday."

Even back at home, in her own bed, she continued to struggle. She remains unable to work.

"I'm still having problems with my legs—I use a cane at home, but I use a walker when I'm out because I've got neuropathy in my feet, and I've got what they call critical care myopathy, where I didn't move for so many days," Hudson said. "They couldn't hardly turn me because my blood pressure would bottom out."

Because she has survived the virus, she has had to learn how to feed herself again, and she's still learning to walk again. But with each goal met, she pushes herself toward complete recovery.

"Of course I have not gone back to work, but I hope I can go back—it will depend on how I keep recovering," Hudson said.

•••

Hudson has three daughters, one of them is a teacher in Henry County Public Schools. She knows how few people in the county have been vaccinated, how some are arguing about whether they should have to wear masks in schools.

She knows the virulent nature of the virus and sees how the delta variant is affecting its latest surge.

Given her life-threatening experience, her profession, and her daughter's career, Hudson has some opinions about how people should be responding to the pandemic. She voices them with a degree of authority.

"I know everybody is fighting the wearing of masks, but the numbers are back up, and they don't need to be fighting this. They need to do what we did last year," Hudson said.

"Several hospitals are full. We went to UNC-Chapel Hill Monday for a follow-up visit, and my doctor told me that they had no beds, and every COVID patient in the hospital had not been vaccinated."

And what about wearing masks in school?

"I think everyone should wear masks in schools and space out enough," she said. "They've got to take these precautions because this delta variant affects children also."

She said the 1-year-old grandson of a friend has COVID-19. "It's hitting children more and younger adults more than at first, and at first it seemed to affect mostly older people," she said.

Hudson was not vaccinated when she contracted COVID-19 because vaccines weren't available then. She got her first shot, of Pfizer, on Monday.

She said she didn't feel side effects from the shot, but she still has side effects from the virus.

"I stay tired from COVID," Hudson said. "That's part of what I'm going through now other than the cognitive and my legs. I stay fatigued a lot.

"I get up in the morning, and I've got energy, but if I do much it just zaps me."

•••

For anyone doubting the potential deadly consequences of the COVID-19 virus and what it can do, Hudson has these words:

"Take it seriously. It's no joke. Take it seriously and go by the CDC guidelines, because it's new and nobody knows. This is totally new from anything that we've ever had, and it's taking lives. I've lost several

friends to COVID.

"People say, 'Oh, it's nothing,' but it is, and it doesn't care about your social status or race, and once you get it, it's awful. It's the worst thing in my whole life that I've had to go through."

If you don't want to get caught up in the nuance of what works and what doesn't, Hudson says simply to "get vaccinated and wear your mask." Then debate all you want.

"It attacks every system you have," Hudson said. "I had to get blood transfusions. I got convalescent plasma—it affected everything."

•••

She said the medical expertise helped her survive and to deal with her ongoing recovery. And she has begun to testify about that journey.

There was her "wonderful team of doctors at UNC-Chapel Hill, and I had prayers from the community. They held fundraisers for me because I'm out of work. I can't work, but God has taken care of everything. He's the only reason I'm sitting here now, and I believe



Pamela Wilson Hudson gives the thumbs-up the day she got home after 74 days in hospitals and therapy.

that with everything within me."

The Elks Lodge and Checkered Pig Restaurant had fundraisers. People donated money.

"I was so blessed with all of that. They actually did a home drive-by when I got back home," she said.

She said she has spoken at a couple of churches. "I was on prayer chains from everywhere and people I didn't even know because my daughters were sharing it as I was going through all this."

As an oncology nurse, Hudson knows first-hand the importance the power of the mind can have in overcoming even overwhelming odds, and she said the support of others gave her what she needed.

"All of that helps the emotions because you're so down in the dumps you can't do anything," Hudson said. "When I first came home I would try to walk and stumble and fall.

"I'm not in a wheelchair.



Pamela Wilson Hudson developed a pressure wound to the back of her head while in the hospital. That's not uncommon among patients confined to a hospital bed for a long period of time.

I was in one, but I've graduated from that and it's going slowly.

"But it's going."

Bill Wyatt is a reporter for the Martinsville Bulletin. He can be reached at 276-638-8801, Ext. 236. Follow him @ billwyatt.

MAJOR EVENT!

MULTI-PROPERTY ACCELERATED SALE!

Smith Mountain Lake, VA

Bid Live or Online: THURS., 8/26

LAKEFRONT • COMMERCIAL • RESIDENTIAL

#1

7 Properties Offered!



Shots

From A1

filling out forms to get their vaccines, Ashe was in a back room where the vaccine is kept, filling syringes.

The clinic was using the Moderna vaccine, which is more convenient for large-scale distribution than the Pfizer vaccine used earlier to vaccinate the health care providers who were in the first round of people to be vaccinated.

Both vaccines must be stored under refrigeration after being taken out of deep freeze, Ashe said. However, the Pfizer vaccine only has a 5-day refrigerated life, whereas the Moderna vaccine can be refrigerated for 30 days.

The vaccine administered on Thursday had been taken out of the super-cold freezer the day before. Each box of vaccine vials was labeled with the date and time by which it must be used.

The vaccines are monitored carefully. "We have not wasted a single dose," Sovah-Martinsville Interim Chief Operating Officer Tory Shepherd said.

"We're treating this like gold," Ashe said. She fills syringes with the doses of vaccine and maintains records of their vaccine stock and reports those records each day on a VDH website.

Karen Harrell was one of the nurses administering the vaccine. Lifting her sleeve, she pointed to the top of her arm, near the shoulder. "We give the vaccine in the deltoid muscle. We do it about two fingers down, so pretty high on the muscle there," she said.

After a person gets vaccinated, he remains in the waiting room for about 15 minutes, "and we just make sure they're feeling good before they leave us, and we give them lots of information as well," Harrell said.

For both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccine, two doses are required, Fitzgerald said. The second dose of the Pfizer vaccine should be administered 21 days after the first dose. The second dose of the Moderna vaccine should be administered 28 days after the first dose. The second dose must be from the same manufacturer as the first dose.

The hospital saves each patient's second dose from in its stock, rather than assuming the second doses would arrive later through the supply chain, Shepherd said.

Each person getting the vaccine receives a vaccination card as verification and an appointment card noting their second appointment. People also are emailed with a reminder.

The hospital manages records of the clinic through a new PrepMod system. It provides "very comprehensive scheduling and takes the data to report to the state," Shepherd said.

Residents of Martinsville and Henry, Patrick and Franklin counties can register at <https://redcap.vdh.virginia.gov/redcap/surveys/?s=N83JNH4PN9>, and officials are listing updated information on the

WPHD website and the department's Facebook page.

And there are paper copies of the information being distributed at the health departments, public libraries, municipal buildings and chambers of commerce in Martinsville, Stuart and Rocky Mount.

From the start

The public vaccines come about six weeks after vaccines started at the hospital: Dec. 15, when the initial batch given that day was 15, to be sure the process ran smoothly as medical providers got used to the intricacies including super-cold storage and preparation of five doses at a time, which had to be given within a limited time period.

Since then, the number of vaccines the hospital gave each day "progressively increased over time," Shepherd said. The vaccines were given in half-day clinics four days a week.

Regular hospital employees staffed those clinics in addition to their normal shifts, she said.

The most vaccines given in a day at the hospital were 120, Shepherd said. In total, 1,673 people in the first round, category 1a, have been vaccinated so far. That category includes hospital staff, EMS responders, law enforcement officers and firefighters.

The Virginia Department of Health's database reported that, as of Thursday afternoon, 6,621 residents of the health district had received at least one dose of the vaccine, and 824 have been fully vaccinated.

The database lags and cites more than 86,000 cases that haven't been mapped, so the totals in the district are not definitive.

It should take until about mid-February for everyone in that first category to be vaccinated, Fitzgerald said.

Looking ahead

Now the hospital and health department are making plans with other community partners through a "community coalition for roundtable discussion... to continue to try to stage larger events," Shepherd said.

Holding clinics at a high school or drive-in style would allow even more people to be vaccinated each day.

The whole vaccination process "takes a lot of planning and coordination," Shepherd said. "Heather and Rachel are phenomenal."

Ashe said she leaves work at 7 in the evenings just to turn around for an early start the next mornings.

"What keeps me going is I really feel that more than any other time in my life I am impacting patients. I have seen the suffering on the other side of this disease," she said, so it is a relief now to be on the offensive, keeping people safe from it with vaccines.

"It's the closest thing to hope that we have," Shepherd said. "We're just so excited to be a part of it. People are so thankful."

Holly Kozelsky reports for the Martinsville Bulletin. She can be reached at holly.kozelsky@martinsvillebulletin.com



PHOTO SUBMITTED

Nurse Karen Harrell (right) administers the COVID-19 vaccine to Michael Boone on Thursday at Sovah-Martinsville's first public coronavirus vaccine clinic. Appointments are made through the health department.

Shots fired at virus

Sovah Health's first clinic for the general public vaccinated about 320 people Thursday.

HOLLY KOZELSKY
hkozelsky@martinsvillebulletin.com

About 320 area residents took part in a major turn-around point of the coronavirus pandemic: They were the first of the general public to get vaccinated.

Sovah Health's first vaccine clinic for the public was held Thursday in the medical center next to the hospital. The vaccine at this point isn't for just anybody - only for people who fall into what the Virginia Department of Health has classified as Phase 1b: people ages 65 and older, frontline essential workers, people ages 16 to 64 with underlying medical conditions and people who live in correctional facilities, homeless shelters and migrant labor camps.

Sovah-Martinsville's Director of Pharmacy Heather Ashe and Employee Health Nurse Rachel Pilson are the primary leads for coordinating the operations of this clinic and future clinics.

Henry County lent the use of tents, which had been set up at the building's entryway to keep snow off the walk. City workers provided traffic control.

By 8:30 a.m. a line of people spaced at least 6 feet apart had formed outside the door.

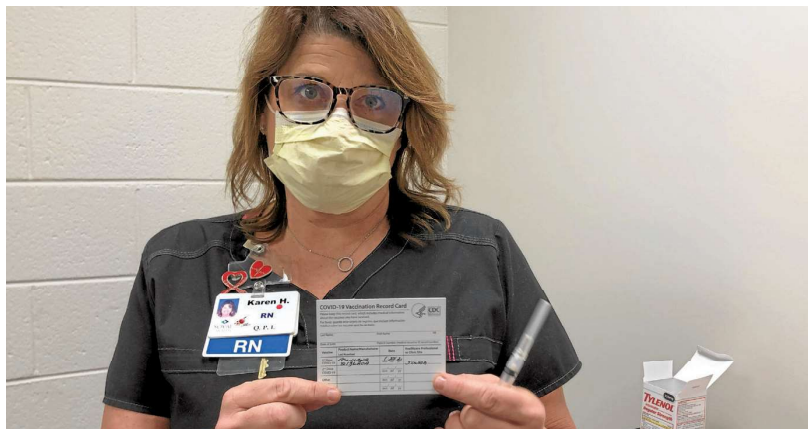
Inside the building, Market Director Kelly Fitzgerald asked, "Are you ready?" Then she opened the door.

"Go team!" cheered Nurse Bonnie Turner as she walked toward one of the rooms where the vaccine would be given. As people filed into the room and began



HOLLY KOZELSKY PHOTOS, MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

Sovah Health Director of Pharmacy Heather Ashe measures out a dose of the Moderna coronavirus vaccine



Nurse Karen Harrell shows the immunization report each person who is vaccinated for the coronavirus vaccine receives.

Please see SHOTS, Page A5



PHOTOS SUBMITTED

Shawana Martin vaccinates Terrence Taylor during a recent COVID-19 vaccination clinic for Henry County Public Schools employees.

Teachers take their shots

Area schools work together to get staff vaccinated.

HOLLY KOZELSKY
hkozelsky@martinsvillebulletin.com

By now, most of the area's school employees who had wanted to be vaccinated against COVID-19 have received their first shots.

Henry County Public Schools, Martinsville City Schools and Carlisle School "are all working together, because the main goal is to get the most people immunized," Henry County Public Schools Nurse Coordinator Sherry Vestal said.

Additionally, Patrick County school employees who had requested the vaccine already have received their first dose.

All Martinsville City Schools employees who had requested the vaccine were vaccinated during a clinic Tuesday at Martinsville High School. Hundreds of Henry County schools employees were vaccinated last Wednesday at Bassett High School, and more on the waiting list were vaccinated during the city schools' clinic on Tuesday.



Margaretta Manigault checks in Cecil France during the Henry County Public Schools' recent COVID-19 clinic. Between two clinics, 575 employees were vaccinated, and 135 remain on the waiting list.

Please see **VACCINES**, Page A6

Vaccines

From A1

Among county schools, “we had more people to sign up than available vaccines, so we have strived to get our teachers in first, and then we have people on a waiting list that we’re trying to get in,” Vestal said.

“We want to get everyone in as soon as possible, including contracted people such as custodial staff, subs, instructional aides, nutrition-cafeteria staff, coaches – anyone that has anything to do with our children.”

The Moderna vaccines were provided by the Virginia Department of Health, Vestal said.

On that first clinic on Wednesday, 510 Henry County Public Schools employees were vaccinated against the coronavirus. Despite the number of people, “it ran like clockwork,” Vestal said.

The event was staffed by five school nurses, Health Office assistants, three health department nurses, central office employees and Vestal.

After people received their vaccines, they waited for 15 minutes in the auditorium, which had been set up as an observation station. They were offered snacks and drinks. EMS volunteers from the Bassett Rescue Squad were on standby “to make sure there were not any adverse reactions” to the shots – and there weren’t, Vestal said. Everyone reported feeling fine.

“Even though I didn’t foresee any issues, I’d rather be safe than sorry,” she said.

Meanwhile, Vestal and the county schools nurses had offered to help staff the city schools’ clinic on Tuesday.

On Monday night, Vestal received notification that city schools had 65 more vaccines than they needed, so she and Henry County Public Schools Director of Communications Monica Hatchett spent the evening calling people on the waiting list.

That clinic on Tuesday was staffed by county schools nurses, three city schools nurses and two health department nurses, Vestal said. The city schools had 222 people scheduled, and the 65 left over vaccines were given to county schools employees.

With those 65 vaccinated Tuesday, the county schools’ waiting list is down to about 135 people waiting.

Several staff members, including Vestal, were vaccinated earlier, during the Phase 1a process, because they work in the medical field or volunteer as EMTs, Vestal said.

The Martinsville City Schools vaccine clinic was open to anyone who works in any capacity in the school system, said Sarah Byrd, Martinsville City Schools’ director of human resources, communications & community outreach.

Two hundred and twen-



PHOTOS SUBMITTED

Henry County Public Schools employee Travis Murphy awaits his shots from a Virginia Department of Health nurse during a COVID-19 vaccination clinic last Wednesday at Bassett High School. He was one of 510 people vaccinated.



Henry County Public Schools employee Trissie Blankenship shows her COVID-19 immunization card.

ty-three people who work in city schools took them up on the offer, out of 376 total employees, including part-timers and coaches.

“The health department told us they had a certain number of vaccines,” Byrd said. “At first we were afraid we wouldn’t have enough,” but there ended up being enough for everyone who wanted it, with the 65 extra doses left over.

The vaccines were provided at no charge by the VDH, she said.

She described the atmosphere in the lobby of the high school auditorium, which had been set up for the event, as “efficient, quiet. People are thankful and appreciative.”

“From overhearing the nurses talk, they are very pleased to be able to offer this to the community. It is all about trying to get as many people vaccinated as possible to stop the spread,” Byrd said.

Patrick County Public Schools held its vaccine clinic on Jan. 27, and all those who wanted to participate – 49% of its employees – were able to be vaccinated, Superintendent Dean Gilbert said. Another clinic will be later in the month to give the second doses.

On Friday, Vestal and the county school nurses are going to help with the vaccine clinic at Carlisle School, Vestal said, adding that Carlisle offered the county schools any leftover vaccines that might remain.

Henry County Schools are operating on a virtual

schedule now with plans to return to a hybrid schedule on March 10. “Most of the people I’ve spoken with want to have at least one of their vaccines under their belt, making them feel more comfortable” returning into groups of people, Vestal said.

The vaccine the staff received requires two doses, with the second to be given to county schools staff Feb. 24. That will have them fully vaccinated before in-person school resumes.

Meanwhile, Henry County schools administrative staff work at the central office in the Henry County Administration Building. They have been given the option to work from home on the two days after they receive their second vaccine, in case they don’t feel well – there have been some reports of people feeling mild flu-like symptoms after their second doses.

In data provided Tuesday (before the clinic) by the Virginia Department of Health, 9,718 people in the West Piedmont Health District now have had at least one dose of the virus, and 1,276 are fully vaccinated with the two doses.

In Henry County, 4,269 people have received the first dose, and 637 are fully vaccinated.

In Patrick County, those figures are 932 and 129, and in Martinsville, 64 have been vaccinated, with seven fully vaccinated. Health officials have said they think those figures are underreported (as thousands are statewide). The health district has received 13,450 doses (and has used 72.2% of them).

Statewide 742,733 people (8.3% of population) have had the initial shot, and 130,735 people are fully vaccinated. The daily average is up to 35,880, about double what it was a week ago.

Holly Kozelsky reports for the Martinsville Bulletin. She can be reached at holly.kozelsky@martinsvillebulletin.com