

Couple's deaths leave 5 orphans

COVID-19 TAKES LIVES
OF HUSBAND AND WIFE
ONLY WEEKS APART

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

There's been no shortage of terrible stories about COVID-19 losses, but they don't get much more tragic than this.

A Stafford County couple in their 40s contracted the virus and died within about two weeks of each other, leaving behind five children and one grandson.

Kevin and Misty Mitchem were friends from their days at Woodbridge High School, then they married 17 years ago and had four children: Riley, 17; Leah, 14, and twins Taylor and Aiden, 11. Kevin also had one daughter, Angel, from a previous relationship; she's 22 and has a son, Lincoln, who will turn 2 in November.

In the wake of their parents' deaths, the four younger children have gone to South Carolina to live with an aunt and uncle, said Mike Mitchem, Kevin's brother in Spotsylvania County.

"Both our families have

been turned upside down," he said on Wednesday. "The kids are the main thing, his oldest daughter just had a son and I'm sure she wanted him to get close with his grandfather and that's not gonna happen now."

Mike Mitchem said that as best he can remember—because recent weeks have been a blur—his brother developed a cough last month and visited an urgent care in Stafford, where he was sent home with cold medicine. When he didn't feel better in a few days, he returned and tested positive for COVID. He was told to go home and rest.

A few days later, Misty Mitchem, who has diabetes, started feeling bad as well, and she went downhill fast. She was quickly sent from the urgent care to Stafford Hospital, then rushed to Mary Washington Hospital, which has treated the bulk of COVID-19 patients in the Fredericksburg region.

It was a Wednesday when family members were told Misty Mitchem wasn't able to breathe on her own and had been put

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PROVIDED

COVID-19 victims Kevin and Misty Mitchem of Stafford left behind five children and a grandson.

FIVE MORE DEATHS

Five more COVID-19 related deaths were reported in the Rappahannock Area Health District on Tuesday and they included people who were in their 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s or 80s. Four were males, one was female. Four were white and one was Black.

To date, 342 people have died from the virus in the local health district, which includes Fredericksburg and the counties of Caroline, King George, Spotsylvania and Stafford.

Hospitalizations have fallen in recent days from a high of 110 patients in the area's three hospitals on Oct. 4 to 71 patients hospitalized as of Tuesday.

While the decline is encouraging, the number of people with "severe enough CO-

VID-19 symptoms needing care in a hospital is still much higher than we'd like to see," said Mary Chamberlin, public information office for the local health district. "We're cautiously optimistic about the decrease in case numbers, as they have still ebbed and flowed over the past few weeks."

Plus, the level of transmission is considered high throughout the district, along with the positivity rate. It measures the percentage of positive COVID-19 tests among all those taken and was 11.9 percent on Wednesday. Anything above 5 percent indicates widespread infection, according to health officials.

—Cathy Dyson

MITCHEMS

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on a ventilator—and her kidneys were functioning at only 50 percent. By the next day, Kevin Mitchem was admitted to Mary Washington and family members were told that Misty Mitchem might not make it another 24 hours.

"Within five hours, she was gone," Mike Mitchem said, adding that it was only a few days between her first symptom and her death. "It really came out of nowhere."

Misty Nicole Newton Mitchem died Sept. 23. She was 46. She'd been trained as a medical transcriptionist, and her obituary described her as a devoted mother and "one of the most caring and loving most people ever met."

Her husband didn't have any health-related issues before he got COVID, his brother said.

"He never smoked, never drank, didn't do drugs, didn't have diabetes, wasn't overweight, was a heavy equipment operator, did a lot of highway work," Mike Mitchem said. "He worked every day. He was always working, always outside, always doing something. Very active."

"My brother was healthy. He was still pretty much young and he had everything to live for," Mike Mitchem added. "He had five kids and a grandson and now all of them have lost him. It's hard on my parents. They're 73, and my mom said your kids are not supposed to die before you."

Kevin Mitchem's decline was more gradual than his wife's. He seemed to be improving at one point, and the family got their hopes up, only to discover the respiratory disease had done irreparable damage to his lungs.

Kevin Lee Mitchem died on Oct. 8. He was 48.

In the midst of the grief, Mike Mitchem said he's dealing with another emotion.

"Part of our pain is anger," he said. "Anger because people are still not getting the vaccine. If you think about it, you need to have certain vaccines before you can even go to school. What's the big deal about this one?"

Mike Mitchem said his brother and sister-in-law had not been vaccinated, even though family members who had been inoculated encouraged them to do the same.

"They'd just been leery. They were going off what they've been hearing and reading on the internet," he said.

Like many others who've been featured on news reports from their hospital beds, Kevin Mitchem felt remorse at the end, his brother said. He called his mother, told her he loved her and said he was sorry he hadn't gotten vaccinated, said Mike Mitchem, who was with her at the time.

She told her son that was in the past, just get better and then get the vaccine. But that day never came.

Rachael Rhodes is the daughter-in-law of Mike Mitchem and she encouraged him and his family to get vaccinated, the same way she tries to educate her patients about the importance of vaccines. She's a doctoral-prepared nurse practitioner who specializes in family medicine and lives in Spotsylvania.

"It's incredibly frustrating to be a medical provider right now with all the misinformation being spread online," she wrote in an email. "It's become very discouraging to hear reasons why vaccines are being declined by patients/people. It's gotten to the point where it's not even worth the discussion anymore because it's completely unrelated to anything medical or scientific."

Still, she's saddened by all the preventable deaths and the impact they have on others, including the Mitchems.

"My heart breaks for their children, who are going through this terrible situation. The loss of one parent is difficult enough, but to lose both parents within a short time span is devastating," she said.

Mike Mitchem has started a GoFundMe page to raise money for the children. He set up the account for people who might have sent flowers "so they can spend their money in a more practical way," he wrote on the site. It's at GoFundMe.com. Search for "Helping the 5 orphaned children left behind."

Mike Mitchem plans to split whatever is raised equally between the five children. Their aunt in South Carolina has said she'll start a college fund for them. So far, almost \$7,000 has been raised.

"It's not a lot. It's not going to get them all through school, but it's a start," Mike Mitchem said.

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Local pediatricians report crisis of COVID-19 testing

RETURN TO SCHOOL LEADS
TO OVERWHELMING NEED
FOR CHILD MEDICAL CARE

BY CATHY DYSON

THE FREE LANCE-STAR

As COVID-19 cases rise among children and almost 8,000 students and staff members in Fredericksburg-area schools have been quarantined from possible exposure, pediatricians across Virginia

are dealing with the virus and various other sicknesses among their patients describe conditions as “the worst they have seen in their career.”

Dr. Michael Martin, president of the Virginia chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, recently sent an email calling attention to a crisis in his profession. He said a “tsunami” of sorts started in the summer, when a large volume of students—many who hadn’t

been to a doctor the previous year—needed school checkups and new required vaccines (not related to COVID-19) before in-person classes resumed.

Once people started being around each other again, respiratory and stomach viruses that usually show up in late fall and winter, including the flu, started making children sick in August.

As schools reopened and youngsters were exposed to others with COVID-19, pe-

diatric practices have been overwhelmed with patients who either need positive tests to confirm their infections or negative tests to allow them to go back to school.

“The first tsunami hit and now the flooding’s happening. It truly is getting worse,” said Martin, whose practice is in Tyson’s Corner. “The other stuff, we probably could have handled,

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Many young patients require testing after virus exposure.

DOCTORS

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but the testing is the thing that broke the camel’s back because of the sheer volume. And there’s no end to it, until kids are vaccinated and the transmission rate goes down.” Dr. Rhonda Winchester with Mary Washington Pediatrics in Spotsylvania County described similarly overwhelming circumstances. She’s been in practice for three years.

“We’re going through things we were told in training we’d never see happen,” she said. “A pandemic for one and measles for another.”

Earlier this month, the Virginia Department of Health announced that five Afghani refugees in the Richmond region tested positive for measles. Winchester said she and other doctors in the Fredericksburg area will be treating the 60 to 80 newborns of refugee families brought to Quantico—which will put even more strain on already overwhelmed practices.

And like seemingly every other business, pediatric practices are experiencing staff shortages from unfilled positions as well as absences when workers must quarantine after exposure to COVID or stay home with children who have been exposed.

“We went from a time in March and April 2020 when I was seeing maybe eight patients a day to now having to turn patients away because we have no more slots available,” Winchester said. “We’re fitting them in at lunch time, taking them after we’re usually done for the day, making the best of the resources that we can.”

Phone calls to other practices requesting interviews went unreturned—presumably because of their busy schedules. Preferred Pediatrics, which has three offices in Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County, has added after-hour clinics three times a week “to serve the increasing demand for patient appointments,” according to its recorded message.

The one thing that Martin hoped would help is having schools provide more COVID-19 tests. The federal government has allocated \$257 million for Virginia schools for a program that provides staffing and test kits, both to randomly screen for infection and to diagnose the virus once it’s suspected.

King George County, Spotsylvania County and Fredericksburg schools have applied for the assistance, called the Virginia School Screening Testing for Assurance or ViSSTA. Stafford County is weighing interest and Caroline County is not interested unless the state requires COVID-19 vaccines for staff or weekly tests for unvaccinated workers, said safety officer Jeff Wick.

Martin hoped that if schools would pick up some of



FILE / PETER CIEHLKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

As schools reopened and youngsters were exposed to COVID-19, pediatric practices have been overwhelmed with young patients who require coronavirus tests.

COVID-19 EXPOSURE IN SCHOOLS

Since schools reopened in mid-August, 1,737 students and public school staff members in the Rappahannock Area Health District have tested positive for COVID-19. Another 7,950 students and school workers have been quarantined after being	exposed to someone with the infection, according to data from school division websites.	cases, 840 quarantined
	Caroline County: 137 cases, 629 quarantined	Spotsylvania County: 587 cases, 3,581 quarantined
	Fredericksburg: 124 cases, 327 quarantined	Stafford County: 695 cases, 2,573 quarantined
	King George County: 194	TOTAL: 1,737 cases, 7,950 quarantined
		—Compiled by Adele Uphaus-Conner

the testing demand, pediatricians could focus on children who had severe issues that might go undiagnosed amid the current crush of patients.

“The concerns others and I have is we’re not going to get to the kids who really need a physician to see them,” he said. “The more the system’s overloaded, whether it’s at the emergency room or our offices, the more chance there’s going to be misses, and that’s going to affect outcomes, and that’s what I’m scared of.”

CASES CLIMB AMONG YOUNG

In the Rappahannock Area Health District, which includes Fredericksburg, Caroline, King George, Spotsylvania and Stafford, 7,874 young people have tested positive for COVID-19 since March 2020.

That’s 2,744 children up to age 9 and 5,130 young people ages 10–19.

Hospitalizations and deaths are rare among the younger set. Locally, 29 children and teens have been admitted to hospitals—many go to specialized children’s hospitals outside the region—and one Stafford County child in the age-9-and-younger group died.

The Virginia Department of Health data shows how cases have ramped up since in-person classes resumed, underscoring one of the reasons pediatricians are feeling such pressure.

Almost one-third of all new cases among local young people have happened since early August, according to VDH.

There have been 1,737 posi-

tive cases among students and staff in the RAHD so far this school year. Another 7,950 adults and children have been quarantined after exposure.

In local schools, children or staff members who test positive for the virus are told to follow standard guidelines from the state health department and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Stay home until at least 10 days since symptoms appeared, at least 24 hours with no fever or fever-reducing medications and until symptoms improve. Those who test positive but don’t have symptoms should isolate for 10 days after their positive test.

The rules regarding quarantine for those in close contact with someone infected differ slightly. Stafford, Caroline and Fredericksburg schools expect close contacts to quarantine for 14 days.

Spotsylvania and King George schools allow testing on Day 5 and a return to school on Day 8 if there’s a negative test. Or, those exposed can quarantine for 10 days and return on Day 11 if they haven’t taken a COVID test or shown symptoms.

“The ‘gold standard’ quarantine period remains 14 days, but CDC does state that the 10- and 7-day periods are also acceptable,” said Mary Chamberlin, public information officer for the local health district. “There is more risk associated with the lower periods of time, however.”

Winchester says the same. “I have many parents who are wanting to rush the testing and that’s not the best way

to approach this,” she said. “Their reason is they have to make money for their families and get back to work. If employers were more flexible and could have some leniency and allow them to work from home, it would definitely help families out.”

SHORTAGE OF TEST KITS

School officials across the area have heard from parents who’ve had problems finding places to get their children tested. Pediatric offices are slammed, some urgent-care centers stopped providing tests for those who weren’t showing symptoms and hospital leaders have said people should visit emergency rooms for life-threatening conditions only, not COVID-19 tests.

“All of us have seen that trend across the region where testing is getting more difficult to get,” said René Daniels, spokesperson for Spotsylvania schools.

That’s why many hope the ViSSTA program will help.

The portion of the program that seems of most interest to local schools is diagnostic testing. Schools would get test kits that can be given to adults or students after they’ve been exposed to someone with COVID-19. The kits are self-explanatory and give rapid results, meaning they don’t have to be sent to a lab.

Daniels was the only one who mentioned that the tests would need to be “procured”—performed at a doctor’s office or similar setting

LOCAL TESTING CLINICS

The Rappahannock Area Health District is offering free drive-thru COVID-19 tests in coming weeks. All ages are welcome and no documentation is required.

Fredericksburg: Sept. 30, 2–5 p.m., Family Life Center, 400 Bragg Hill Drive

Caroline County: Sept. 28, 8–11 a.m., Ladysmith Rescue Squad, 18287 Jefferson Davis Highway, Rutherglen

King George County: Oct. 5, 2–5 p.m., King George Citizens Center, 8076 Kings Highway

Stafford County: Sept. 29 and Oct. 6, 3–6 p.m., Stafford Hospital, 101 Hospital Center Blvd.

Pre-registration for all events is recommended but not required. To register, go to vdh.virginia.gov/rappahannock/freecovid19testing/. More information is available by calling 540/899-4797 weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

where a professional could verify they were done accurately.

ViSSTA provides enough test kits to cover 5 percent of a school system’s enrollment. Fredericksburg applied for kits three weeks ago and hopes to have them soon, said Matt Eberhardt, deputy superintendent.

He said Fredericksburg has considered reducing its quarantine period for close contacts from 14 days to 10 days, both to ease the burden on parents and to reduce the amount of time children are away from school. But he thinks the discussion is premature until ViSSTA can provide enough tests and mid-October arrives. A University of Virginia model, used by the state health department, predicts that COVID-19 cases will peak around the first of October then gradually decline.

While Eberhardt was fearful of jinxing himself, he said on Friday that positive cases and quarantine numbers have been dropping for three weeks in city schools and he hopes the trend continues.

When vaccines become available for younger children, he’d like for Fredericksburg schools to offer clinics during school hours. During a recent event for Walker-Grant Middle School and James Monroe High School, 80 students were vaccinated against COVID-19.

“We decided to do it during the school day and on school grounds and that was part of the reason we had a better turnout,” he said. “We have a lot of discussing to do [when the vaccine becomes available for younger students], but I’m fully in favor of schools being centers if that means more kids are getting vaccinated.”

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A dose of kindness with every shot of vaccine

BY CATHY DYSON

THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Every Wednesday and Saturday, people from various walks of life help give COVID-19 vaccines at the Colonial Beach Community Center—then get a dose of kindness for their efforts.

Since the center began offering vaccines in March as an offshoot of the Guadalupe Free Clinic of Colonial Beach, businesses and residents have given the project a shot in the arm through contributions of food, money and even gravel for the driveway that leads off the property.

They've brought baked goods, Chi-

nese and Thai takeout and pizza by the boxes. They've offered hot chocolate, coffee and knitted hats when brisk breezes blew from nearby Monroe Creek. They've shared strawberries, freshly picked from local fields, in warmer weather.

"What incredible people in Colonial Beach," said Barbara Fulscado, a volun-

teer who jokes that a person "can get fat working at the clinic."

Then on a serious note, she said the pandemic hasn't always brought out the best in people. The evening news is proof of that.

What's happening at Colonial Beach is an exception, she said. "You can grumble all you want, but I have seen more good come out of this."

Aside from Lance Carrington, the Guadalupe Free Clinic director who earns a part-time salary for what's more like a full-time job, those who work at the clinic do so because they want to be

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there, not to earn a pay-check.

“Everything about this is volunteer,” said Mike Cabrey, the town’s vice mayor. “They’ve all decided they want to be part of the solution.”

During normal times, the Guadalupe Free Clinic provides medical care for residents of Westmoreland County who don’t have insurance. The facility operates on the grounds of St. Elizabeth of Hungary Catholic Church and is funded by donations, including support from Mary Washington Healthcare.

When COVID-19 vaccines became available in December, free clinics throughout the state were asked if they wanted to be part of the distribution, and Carrington filled out the necessary paperwork. The facility started giving out vaccines on Jan. 20, but “it quickly became too big an operation for our little clinic,” he said.

He checked with Mayor Robin Schick and the Town Council agreed to let the clinic set up shop in the Community Center on Marshall Avenue. Some of the volunteers who help with vaccines also support the clinic, but many others are there solely to help stamp out the spread of the virus. Likewise, some have been trained through the Virginia Department of Health as Medical Reserve Corps, but they’re functioning as Guadalupe Free Clinic volunteers on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Cabrey has become the “de facto coordinator” of the outside operation—making sure drivers have the needed forms, park in allotted spaces, enter the small building for their shots, then return to their vehicles and get in a separate line for observation.

He runs it like a military operation and, though retired, he has the haircut, physique and movements of a man who spent 30 years in the Army. On a typical Saturday morning, he jogs from one vehicle to the next, greeting those inside and directing them to the right area.

Inside, Caryn Self-Sullivan, a Fredericksburg woman who’s studied manatees in Central America, checks people’s temperatures and ushers them to the proper stations. When she realized Carrington didn’t have all the supplies needed for the clinic, she started a Facebook campaign that raised \$6,000. Other residents



Volunteer Linda Bradley fills vaccine syringes at the clinic, which has gotten support from the town.

LOCAL VACCINE DOSES		
LOCALITY	VACCINATED WITH ONE DOSE (People/percentage)	FULLY VACCINATED (People/percentage)
Caroline	11,583 / 38%	9,567 / 31%
Fredericksburg	11,563 / 40%	9,588 / 33%
King George	9,727 / 36%	8,016 / 30%
Spotsylvania	56,675 / 42%	45,841 / 34%
Stafford	60,737 / 40%	49,085 / 32%
RAHD TOTAL *	150,285 / 40%	122,097 / 32%
Culpeper	22,637 / 43%	18,672 / 36%
Fauquier	35,465 / 50%	29,083 / 41%
Orange	16,008 / 43%	13,372 / 36%
Westmoreland	7,799 / 43%	6,315 / 35%
VIRGINIA	4.46M / 52%	3.54 M / 42%

Note: Information is as of Friday, but it can take 72 hours for vaccines to be reported. People fully vaccinated got both doses of Pfizer or Moderna or the single-shot Johnson & Johnson. They are included in the one-dose total.

*Rappahannock Area Health District includes Fredericksburg and the counties of Caroline, King George, Spotsylvania and Stafford.

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

saw it and would hand Carrington a check after they got their shots.

The money went toward the purchase of gloves and syringes, masks and copies of all the two-sided forms, in English and Spanish, needed for those getting vaccinated.

Fuscaldo, a King George County nurse who worked with lepers when her husband, Bob, was stationed in Vietnam during the war, puts those she’s vaccinating at ease with laughter. When Jean Weeks saw she was about to get a “kiddie Band-Aid” to cover her injection site, Fuscaldo said: “You get a super girl, Wonder Woman.”

At the same table in the back of the building, Dr. Jeff Rothstein, a neurologist from Johns Hopkins University, also asks residents about their health and any allergies they may have. He lives in Baltimore, has a weekend home at Colonial Beach and figures while he’s there, he might as well help with the vaccination effort, just as he did in Baltimore with fellow hospital workers.

He spends his workdays with patients suffering

from Lou Gehrig’s disease, so being able to dole out a dose of preventive medicine “is a nice balance,” said the physician, who wears his white coat from Johns Hopkins and answers to “Dr. Jeff.”

The volunteers at the vaccination clinic—about 10 outside and eight inside—have helped to give out almost 3,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine. They started with Colonial Beach first responders, government officials and teachers, then continued down the list of essential workers, always prioritizing the senior set.

That’s obvious during the clinic. Those who can’t walk into the building have the shots brought to them. Henry Brown sat in the passenger side of a car during a recent clinic as a nurse asked questions and Cabrey provided moral support. “You won’t feel a thing,” he said.

Brown seemed unfazed by the shot. As his son, Albert, maneuvered the car into the observation line, Henry Brown said it’s pretty nice that clinic volunteers did this for him. He’s not too steady

on his feet these days, being weeks from his 93rd birthday.

“I used to be a young man, now I’m an old boy,” he said.

Some Colonial Beach residents drive their golf carts to the clinic, as Gary Starkey did on a recent Saturday with his son, Chris, who was getting his second shot. But not everyone who comes to the facility lives in the town.

Troy Robinson works in one of the restaurants on the weekends, lives in King George and spends his weekdays working in Richmond. The Colonial Beach clinic was the most convenient for him.

Carrington also has taken a team of nurses to independent living facilities and homebound residents in the region. As vaccines have become more available—and interest has waned—he makes a point of not turning away anyone, even those who got their first dose somewhere else. As long as they got the Moderna vaccine the first time, he says the Colonial Beach clinic can accommodate them.

When the vaccine was more limited in the early stages of the rollout, the clinic received lists of names of those who had pre-registered with the Three Rivers Health District. Dr. Rich Williams, district director, started calling the Colonial Beach clinic the “northern outpost” because the nine other localities in the district lie to its south.

There’s been a lot of collaboration among health-care systems, medical offices and health departments in the sprawling and rural district, and “the Guadalupe Free Clinic, in particular, has been one of the more highly willing partners to reach across any lines they needed to,” Williams said. “It’s been a spectacular collaborative effort.”

And certainly a needed one, especially in areas like Colonial Beach, which the mayor noted is 45 minutes from the nearest hospital.

“It’s a benefit to everybody that there can be any kind of medical service in Colonial Beach,” she said.

Donna and Randall Sisk, who live in nearby Oak Grove, recently got their second doses of the vaccine at Colonial Beach. She said it’s wonderful the way people have come together to help each other.

“It’s typical of Colonial Beach,” Donna Sisk said. “They have a lot of good people here.”

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