



# Medina County Auditor

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## HOMETOWN HERO

### Making the transition from caregiver to family

*Brunswick nurse manager working to ensure COVID patients receive extraordinary care in extraordinary times*

By Melissa Martin



BRUNSWICK – Throughout the 12 years she’s worked as a nurse in Lakeside 55, a gastrointestinal medical/surgical unit of University Hospital’s Cleveland Medical Center, Brunswick resident Erica Tegowski-Dupay and her colleagues have been performing their jobs day-in and day-out under the hospital’s longtime motto: “Like Our Own.”

“We’ve always been encouraged to treat our patients like they are our very own family members,” Erica,

who has recently been promoted to nurse manager of her department, said this week. “We all knew how to provide passionate care, but in the wake of this coronavirus pandemic, we’re now having to learn how to adapt to a very different style of nursing.”

In addition to working longer hours, Erica explains, nurses everywhere are donning more personal protective equipment than ever before while still having to perform what, by most standards, are considered intricate jobs. In Erica’s case, the changes don’t stop there as her entire unit has undergone a virtual transformation over the past six weeks to become one of

the hospital's two designated COVID-19 floors, now operating in tandem with the hospital's intensive care unit.

On one hand, with the majority of nonessential surgeries and procedures canceled or postponed, the hospital has been seeing fewer non-COVID patients in recent weeks, Erica said, which has kept the focus more on patients suffering from coronavirus. On the flipside, however, with stricter visitation policies now in place, COVID patients are prohibited from having bedside visitors due to the risk of spreading the virus, which means the line between caregiver and friend is more blurred than ever.

"These patients are very sick, and it has become our responsibility to care for them in possibly the scariest and loneliest moments of their lives," she said. "I'd say that having a patient pass away without family at the bedside has been the hardest, worst part of this all."

Even prior to COVID-19, Erica said it has always been the hospital's policy to never let a patient pass away alone. That priority has become even more important now that patients don't have their families and friends to rely on for moral support.

"We make certain there is always someone in the room during those last moments," she said, noting that the hospital also utilizes iPads as a way for patients and their families to communicate. "We encourage families to gather their loved ones and to FaceTime with the patient as much as possible throughout their stay."

Still, Erica admits that learning how adapt to being there around the clock for patients while limiting their own exposure to the virus has been the most difficult part of the transition for her and her team.

“Nurses work as a team and spend so much time at the bedside connecting with our patients,” she said. “We are trying to figure out how to best care for our patients while protecting ourselves and limiting exposure. Change is definitely difficult in such a rapidly changing environment.”

While the latest information on the disease itself changes from day to day, along with the overall data being collected, Erica said it’s become her job to not only make sure the information is shared, but that her staff’s focus remains on the patients.

Like many of her colleagues, Erica said that when she initially heard about the COVID-19 virus, she felt like most did – scared of the unknown.



“As nurses we are exposed to so much throughout the course of our careers, and this seemed to be just another part of the job. But then we saw what was happening in Italy and we knew this was different. We suddenly had a sense of fear - fear for ourselves, fear for our loved ones, fear for what this will do to our healthcare systems, and fear that we will not be able to manage this.”

Fortunately, she said, those fears have been quelled in recent days by the hospital’s overall commitment to the safety of both employees and their patients.

“We’re lucky in that we have plenty of PPE,” she said. “My hospital has done a great job of preparing for what is happening currently and for a surge, ensuring we have adequate supplies. “The garb may be hot and sweaty, but it keeps us very protected.”

Erica said she is grateful for the steps taken by Gov. Mike DeWine, which has flattened the curve, allowing medical systems statewide to adequately prepare for caring for the COVID-19 patient population.

“Each week, as we learn a little more about this virus, my fears lessen,” she said. “My hospital and all of its healthcare workers are ready to take this on.”

Equally appreciated, she says, is that the hospital continues to provide a tremendous amount of support for its staff during these difficult situations as its leadership groups, supervisors, physicians and pastoral care rally and help when help is needed.

If that’s not beneficial enough, another bonus, Erica says, hospital morale is at an all-time high.

“In my 12 years of nursing, I have never seen the support, the teamwork, and the camaraderie as I have seen from the hospital and the community. I am so proud to be a nurse and proud to be able to be work in this profession during this very surreal time. I have always been proud of the work I do, but right now the entire world is seeing what I have always known and it's pretty awesome!”