



Medina County Auditor

HOMETOWN HERO

Ready, willing, and able

Medina nurse practitioner travels to epicenter of pandemic to provide much-needed care to those on the front lines

By Melissa Martin

MEDINA – When Medina nurse practitioner Jenn Heller received notification March 17 that her job was being placed on hiatus due to the closure of all nonessential businesses throughout the state, she could have easily decided to stay home, catch up on projects around the house and binge watch television shows like many of her neighbors and friends.

But for Heller, sitting on the sidelines during the biggest health crisis the nation has faced in more than 100 years wasn't quite how she wanted to look back and remember this moment in history.

“In 20 years, when my grandchildren ask about the global pandemic and what we were doing during this time in history, I did not want to say that I just sat on the couch and watched Netflix,” she said. “I wanted to do something effective. I wanted to be helpful.”

Fast-forward almost two months later, not only has Heller kept herself busy these past several weeks, but she has also crafted herself a one-of-a-kind story she can pass down to her grandchildren after accepting her own personal call to duty.

After being laid off from Juvly Aesthetics in Cleveland, Heller said she began to receive multiple emails from head-hunters looking to fill positions in the nursing field. One of the emails she spotted almost immediately was one advertising a call for nurses interested in providing COVID-19 relief at a New York City Hospital.

Heller knew she was more than qualified for the position. Since becoming registered nurse in 2007, she has worked in numerous capacities in the field, starting as bedside nurse for children in the pediatric intensive care unit, neonatal intensive care unit and on general pediatric floors. After earning her degree as a family nurse practitioner, she worked in general family practice, Minute Clinic, several federally qualified health centers and Juvly Aesthetics in Cleveland, where she is currently employed. She also works part-time for a Massillon-based chiropractic group.

After expressing an interest in the position, which required her to travel to New York City – the epicenter of the U.S. pandemic, Heller was interviewed by a recruiter April 3. She was on the ground in New York City three days later where she was ready to lend her services at the Billie Jean King Center, a facility that was built as a field hospital specifically for COVID-19.

As she boarded the plane in Cleveland April 6 for what would become a three-week trip, Heller said her feelings were mixed.

“Covid-19 was – and still is – such an unknown at this point. We don’t know a whole lot about this virus,” she said, noting that the job meant she’d have to spend her one-year wedding anniversary away from her husband. “I was afraid that if I did get ill, I would be isolated from my family far away from home and wasn’t even sure if I’d be able to let them know how I was.”

Though Ohio’s stay-at-home order created a new normal for many Ohioans, Heller said it was evident almost immediately that New York’s lockdown was substantially more far-reaching.

The city that never sleeps she said, was deserted.

“Traveling was so odd. The airports were all but deserted,” she said, noting there wasn’t any traffic on the streets, even in the heart of the city. “To be arriving at JFK in the heart of New York City on a Monday morning and be one of only a handful of people in the entire airport was eerie. And when I was being driven by Uber to my hotel and the command center, the roads were clear and almost no traffic. There was no one walking on the streets. There was no one out. It was like a movie.”

At the Billie Jean King Center, Heller worked night shift and was onsite every day for her 12-hour shift. During her time there, she helped oversee employee healthcare, which meant taking care of the many others there that were working at the site, including nurses, EMTs, medics and other nurse practitioners and physicians' assistants, as well as workmen and logistics employees. She also was able to go out with teams of providers to check on patients that were completing their two-week quarantine in local hotels.

"Primarily, we were making sure that everyone was still doing OK and didn't require readmission or more medical attention, Heller said.

When she wasn't at work, she and the team of nurses hired along with her, spent their time living at various hotels throughout the city.

"I will say one of the most amazing parts of the trip was that I have a college friend who is a member of the local teacher's union where I was staying," she said. "I reached out to him and asked about how to get some food and supplies for my room for the time I was there. There were some fast food places close, but everything else was closed or would have required getting an Uber or taxi to get to the store and the expense was going to be pretty high."

Her friend, Heller said, immediately posted on social media the name of the hotel where Heller was staying and asked members of the union to consider dropping off items, such as cups of soup, protein bars, bottles of water, etc., for the medical staff staying there.

"Within about a half-hour, people started dropping off items," Heller said. "We ended up being able to open up a conference room where everyone staying in the hotel was able to come and get food and drinks, including wine and beer. They brought hot meals every day. It was truly amazing how we were embraced by the community."

Of course, friends and family in Medina were equally as thoughtful, she added.

"I was kept going with wonderful care packages. I would get them and just cry," she said. "My family and friends in Medina have been amazing."

The most difficult part of her experience, Heller said, was the “chaos and the uncertainty of the operations and how things were moving,” she said.

“Something on this scale, like this, has never been done before,” Heller said, noting that the journey also brought her to people who she now refers to as her closest friends due to the shared experience they had during the crisis. “We were flying the airplane while it was still being built.”

Though states are beginning to reopen, Heller reminds individuals that COVID-19 remains a novel virus and that those working in the medical field are still learning about the disease and how to combat it.

While she was in New York City, she said, physicians made the move from using the drug, Plaquinel, to treat the virus to azyithromycin. Additionally, she said, most patients were prescribed vitamin C infusions and doctors discovered that melatonin appeared to help with inflammation.

“Magnesium helps with vitamin C absorption. Vitamin D3 was also being used clinically with some positive outcomes. But, it’s all a moving target,” Heller said. “This is a complex virus that attacks various sites along with the lungs. It may also be associated with increase in blood clots. There may be some stomach and gastrointestinal issues with it as well.”

Because of all the unknowns, she said, infection control needs to remain a priority.

“Wash your hands. Wash your hands. Wash your hands,” she says. “Keep your hands away from your face. If you don’t feel well, stay home. Wash your hands some more and try to get yourself in the healthiest state you can be in – in the event that you do get sick. Quit smoking. Cut down on alcohol consumption. Increase your water intake. Become more active. Eat a healthy, well-balanced diet. Take your vitamins. Pay attention to your chronic diseases and keep them well controlled.”