



Hope Spreads

**Story by: Jason Craig
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The past year has been the worst, yet most inspiring, of my life. As with so many others, it is challenging to identify the most impactful moments. However, upon reflection, these are the three that best represent the progression of this year through my experiences:

The Reality of Pandemic

The statement was simple: “Do we have enough body bags?” It was the first deep realization of what we were planning for and dealing with, but it got worse. Several minutes later the follow-up question was even more sobering: “Where can we find a better source of adolescent and pediatric body bags?” As with so many aspects of this challenge, my thoughts went immediately to my two teenage sons and wife at home and how devastating this experience may become for our family and undoubtedly for so many others throughout the world.

Our Hospital Incident Command (HICS) team had been meeting continuously for three straight weeks. The accomplishments were incredible, and the commitment was unlike anything I have ever seen. Personal sacrifice was a given, and the willingness to take on new challenges as they emerged was a daily occurrence. During a HICS meeting in late March, we had extensive discussions about the operational realities of the hospital. At one point in the conversation, these two questions emerged. The room was silent for several beats before we could arrange our thoughts and begin solving the pragmatic question. From that point on in the planning, success in my mind was defined as “no employee dies, all keep their jobs.”

The Worst Day

My first direct exposure to a COVID-positive patient dying while on a ventilator. Surrounded by our teams, all working in a controlled and calm manner to give the patient everything they could. The visual of a ventilated patient surrounded by eight to ten highly trained, highly compassionate, and committed staff—all virtually powerless to do anything more—was devastating. The surge was at its worst. All measures and data points were peaking, which meant the disease had taken its full effect and our neighbors, friends, and coworkers were experiencing the worst of what COVID had to offer. I had to see it personally if I was going to have any meaningful perspective.

The census in our critical care unit had been quite high for weeks, and we were now seeing more and more patients needing a ventilator to assist their breathing. The walk through the critical care unit that day was different than past weeks. The teams were tired and emotionally drained. Experiencing this situation created an indelible reality for me: these are the very best of the best staff when it comes to critically ill patients, and they feel they have failed the patient when they die. Intellectually, we all know that isn't true, but the emotional toll of experiencing this multiple times in a short time period for a team that rarely “fails” is a shot to the confidence and can create a feeling of helplessness. The humbling mix of helplessness, fatigue, and fading hope can't last forever, can it?

Turning point

Thursday, December 17, 2020. Exhausted teams from weathering the worst of what COVID wrought on our communities. For nine months we had a feeling of being completely at the mercy of this virus with no means of fighting back. At 7 a.m., the momentum began to shift for our teams. Five staff members all simultaneously received their first injection of the vaccine. Knowing we had thousands of doses on the way—enough to vaccinate all staff who wanted to be vaccinated in the next three weeks—felt like hope in this never-ending pressure cooker. There were smiles on every face and a true sense of accomplishment from the teams that had worked continuously for weeks to prepare for this moment, knowing they would forever change their co-workers lives and shift the momentum. The contrast between this moment and the past eight weeks of seeing faces on our inpatient units and critical care units was striking. Masks hide a lot, but not eyes. I hadn't seen a staff member with sparkling eyes in months. Seeing an ocean of them, sometimes welled with tears of joy, lifted a few heavy weights and led to a sense of hope that we could finally fight back.

Artist Dana Sterzinger Eau Claire, WI

Dana Sterzinger was born and raised in central Wisconsin and graduated from UW-Eau Claire in 2010 with a BFA with an emphasis in painting and a minor in art history. Painting is Dana's chosen form of expression. The act of painting is an opportunity to discover profound space from the void of blank canvas. Pure magic. Her artwork is a spectrum of both representational and nonrepresentational imagery.

Dana lives in Eau Claire where she has a beautiful Secret Garden Studio behind her house in the Randall Park area. Her paintings have been exhibited regionally at Tangled Up in Hue, Racy D'Ilenes Coffee Lounge, and Infinity Beverages.

This painting is infused with hope from the beginning. Everything started with healing white light and a message that all who witness will find comfort on their path towards healing. I followed Jason Craig's writing, using their words as a guide. At times I literally wrote their words on the canvas, calling in their experience fighting this virus. There was a time of darkness, of deep darkness, where dark clouds consumed the painting, symbolizing the hopeless despair of November 2020. That is until the flicker, that quick burst of light just before the sun comes up, that ignition spark. A flash of hope, five colleagues receive their first vaccination simultaneously. Hope spreads.

View all the pieces in the *Healing Reflections* [online gallery](#).