Marcia Brooks MSN RN BC
New Haven, CT
By Kiara C. Jones

Connecticut had been warned that the pandemic would creep into its community because of its proximity to New York and other major metropolitan areas. Yale New Haven Hospital wanted to be prepared. The hospital took action to set up a Pop-Up COVID-19 Care Unit and began searching for staff to lead the unit. Marcia Brooks had graduated from her master’s program in 2016 and launched into a position as a clinical outcome leader. Her role was to manage a population of patients with the goal of improving the long-term outcomes for that population. Three years later, she transitioned into ambulatory care. When the pandemic hit, she was working in the heart and vascular center in the anticoagulation clinic. “My manager physically came into our clinic setting and said that some of us were needed back in patient care. I was asked to join the newly formed COVID Unit.” The ask was a shock to Marcia and took a while for her to process. “I had an obligation to go back in and help, but it was very scary because you’re afraid that you’re gonna be on this unit every day, and you’re gonna be going home. The fear of bringing the virus home to your family … I have a husband, three kids, and my youngest daughter is a severe asthmatic. I don’t know how I would have dealt with … bringing something home to them.” She sat down with her family, and they had a long discussion. “Our whole life pretty much had to change. When I came home, there was a whole process of me changing clothes and disinfecting before I could come into the house.” Her daughter’s welcome home hugs were put on hold. “Just even having the conversation about, ‘What if Mommy actually got sick?’ was heartbreaking.” Marcia knew she would need to quarantine away from them or stay at a hotel. Emotions in her household ran high.

Marcia was deployed to the COVID unit from March until July 2020. She saw firsthand the devastation of the disease and was shocked to hear reports of conspiracy theories in the news. “You hear people say that COVID-19 is not real. But then when you’re on that floor, you can see it’s real. You can see a patient who’s doing well and can turn critical - just like that.” Marcia says the hardest part was knowing the fear her patients felt. “They see you walk into the room. You have on this gown, and you have on this space shield with the N-95 mask. You could see the fear in their eyes.” Her patients were alone.
without family able to visit. Marcia did what she could to comfort them. “I had taken a patient to the bathroom and settled her in bed and then, prior to me leaving the room, I asked her if she needed anything. She said, ‘Well, can you just sit down with me for a moment?’ So I just sat with her. She was saying how scared she was, and the hardest part was that she felt alone.” Marcia saw that her patient had an iPhone. “Before I left the room, I helped her figure out how to use FaceTime. She was able to communicate with her daughter, whom she hadn’t seen for almost a week. It gave her so much peace.”

At home, Marcia’s family made the best of the difficult situation. Marcia was isolated from her family. “My husband built me a gym in the basement. I was exercising on the treadmill and doing yoga on YouTube.” Marcia said working out was a great way to relieve the stress. “You know, you may have a bad day. You feel tired and broken down, but then the next day you rise up. It’s a better day, and you know you made that difference.” That’s the reason Marcia says she got into nursing. “I think what got me through that initial anger phase when I was questioning, ‘Why am I the person that’s getting picked to go in the [COVID Unit]? And then I realized, it’s me because I have the skills to do it. I need to be there to support my team, my organization, and be there for these patients. That’s why I went into nursing. So, that’s why I was chosen to go into the COVID unit.” Marcia and her husband took advantage of his time at home to upgrade their backyard. They decided they wanted a pool, an outdoor screen, and a fire pit. “COVID has brought my family closer because when you can’t go anywhere, you are forced to be home and spend time together.” This was a welcome respite from the escalating numbers of COVID cases Marcia was facing at the hospital.

The value of Marcia’s sacrifice was realized each time a patient went home. “In our hospital when the patient got discharged, we started to play the Andra Day song [Rise Up (Available on Spotify)]. We would call our overhead system and let them know we were about to discharge a patient, and then we … all gathered in the hallway. As we pushed the patient out through the hallway, we all just started clapping and cheering. And then you hear that song over the PA system. So even if you weren’t on that unit, you knew that there was a patient in the hospital that had survived COVID and was able to get discharged to go home. That is still a great experience every time we can do that. I remember when we started hearing the song multiple times during the day. It was a tremendous feeling.”
Marcia says whenever she felt lost during the pandemic, she would think back to why she started nursing in the beginning. “It comforts me knowing that every time we see a patient, everything that we do is making a difference. Sometimes you may not see it, but it makes a difference.”