Darnell Caldwell
New Orleans Black Nurses Association

Darnell Caldwell, BSN, RN, is living proof that how you start life isn’t how you have to finish it.

Caldwell, a New Orleans native, who has been a nurse for six years never saw herself in the position.

“When nursing was very much in the distance. I didn’t know anyone doing it. Me being a teenage mother, having a daughter at 17, having my brother killed at my school and graduating from high school with a 1.7 GPA, nursing did not look like it was even in the cards. Something in me always wanted to be a nurse, but it was when an uncle of mine was diagnosed with cancer, and we scrambled to try and save him and help him and failed... watching him go through that, I decided it was something I never wanted to experience again. I wanted to help others who didn’t know what to do. I was a first-generation college graduate,” she said.

Caldwell spent many years working in various areas of the healthcare field, including as a phlebotomist and an emergency medical service technician while raising a family with her husband. In 2015, she graduated with a 3.31 grade point average from Southern University A&M College in Baton Rouge with a bachelor’s degree in nursing.

“My first job was as a trauma O.R. nurse in a level one hospital. We saw a lot of tragedy. You can lose yourself if you see death all the time. To have someone who looks like you in the operating room lets you have a sense that you’re not in it by yourself. That was the basis of my OR career. OR wasn’t taught in nursing school, so I paid out of pocket for my specialty training. Right after nursing school, I was diagnosed with lupus. In the OR, that was safe for me because it was a sterile environment—we were already masked up.”

As a result of the pandemic, Caldwell’s veil of safety was lifted.

“‘When life gives us lemons and we have those really hard days, focus on the bigger picture. The bigger picture is never us.’

NBNA offers therapy and wellness. Check out nbnareset.com."
“When the pandemic hit New Orleans, I worked in the operating room. I was so afraid that I could not help my fellow teammates because I had lupus and did not know how to protect myself and still work in my field.

“The OR team was taken apart and assigned to other parts of the hospital, and I went into employee health, doing drug screenings and onboarding new employees. We came to the forefront, to test for COVID and follow them. That process was very detailed and always changing. It was always a lot of learning to keep up with what was going on, to be very transparent. A good friend of mine was one of the first nurses to get sick from one of her patients.”

Caldwell was able to work in other parts of the hospital as well, assisting with employee health and lab testing for COVID for both patients and employees, as well as mobile testing and outreach vaccination clinics. She said she was eventually able to assist with the coordination of testing and vaccinations in schools and churches, and she also landed a part-time job working as a school nurse in a local high school.

“I didn’t see this two years ago or even a year ago. I was comfortable with what I was doing. I never saw myself as an educator, and now I’m a school nurse,” she said of her recently acquired dual role. “There are so many avenues you can do or try to do.

“A friend of mine was graduating from nurse practitioner school and couldn’t do it anymore, and she thought I would be perfect for it. I saw how sad and fearful the teachers were. They were afraid to come back to school. I was able to talk about sanitizers and six feet from a first-level experience of why it was important. They thought I was mean,” she said, laughter piercing her quiet demeanor. “I told my principal I was okay with that because I wanted them to be safe at all cost.”

Despite her safety talks and protocols, in January, Caldwell contracted COVID-19 and passed it to her entire household, including her 82-year-old father and her five-year-old grandson.

“It’s been hard and challenging. I’ve been very afraid, but in the midst of it you, you don’t realize you’ve been afraid. I didn’t realize what COVID was doing emotionally. If COVID was going to take my life, I was going out fighting for myself, my family, and my community.”

Her sickness gave her lots of time to reflect.
“Don’t take life for granted. We think we have time. We plan for tomorrow. The simplest thing is thinking your loved ones are going to be there. We don’t have to wait for the holidays to celebrate life. We are telling the ones we love that we love them every day. We know life is so precious now more than ever.”

Since her recovery, Caldwell has resumed her work duties, including teaching classes in advanced life support and basic life support and scheduling GI patients for surgery. She is also back in school working on a master’s degree in health care administration, which she plans to obtain in 2022. Caldwell is committed to continuing her volunteer work with the New Orleans Black Nurses Association (NOBNA) where she currently serves as finance secretary and chair of the public relations and social media committee.

“Had it not been for them,” she said, referring to NOBNA, “I wouldn’t be a nurse today. I started off as a student representative on the board... They surrounded me with knowledge and love. They gave me over $10,000 in scholarships when I was in school. They are my reason why! If I can become half the nurses they are, I would be so blessed. And that’s why I have to reach back and help others along the way to become nurses. We must keep going.”

And keep going, she will, all while inspiring others along the way.

“When life gives us lemons and we have those really hard days, focus on the bigger picture. The bigger picture is never us. It’s our why. Why did we start this journey, why did I want to be the change I see in the world, in my community, in my family? As nurses, we all have our why. On my hard days, I play my favorite song, ‘If I Can Help Somebody’ by Mahalia Jackson. That’s my why. And then some days I sing ‘The Lazy Song’ by Bruno Mars’ That’s my why for the moment, and that’s okay also. It’s not a secret. It’s the golden rules of life: treat others the way you want to be treated, find your purpose, and give it your all. If you don’t believe in God (’cause I do), find a higher power to get you through. You’ll need it. And lastly, It’s okay to make a mistake, but try not to make the same mistake twice.”