Samantha Gambles Farr  
San Diego Black Nurses Association

Over the last year, Samantha Gambles Farr, MSN, NP-C, CCRN, RNFA, a nurse practitioner (NP) intensivist, has reached a critical point in her life, both personally and professionally.

“This has been a pivotal moment in my nursing career,” she said of the COVID-19 pandemic. “It has taken me into spaces if I weren’t in a leadership role, I probably wouldn’t have had a seat at the table.”

As a result of the pandemic, Farr, who has worked in the surgical intensive care unit at UC San Diego Health for six years and serves as president of the San Diego Black Nurses Association (SDBNA), Inc., has been at the forefront of assisting with the pandemic. In addition to working as the only nurse practitioner in the surgical intensive care unit and serving as a mentor for NP students, in her role with SDBNA, she has worked with the executive board of the organization to establish their COVID-19 taskforce. The organization has worked with community partners to establish COVID-19 vaccination clinics, and SDBNA volunteers have vaccinated more than 7,000 San Diegans, mainly African Americans. Although the vaccines were free, the supplies needed to stock the clinics were not, but they were covered thanks to a grant from the San Diego Foundation, and the clinics were staffed by volunteers that included SDBNA retirees and working nurses and student nurses.

“This unprecedented time has given the San Diego Black Nurses Association so many opportunities to be of service.... we wanted to ensure we were there for our community,” she said. “We started the clinic in mid-February 2021, and one of our members got the first vaccine in San Diego County.”

Her work has also helped her give voice to those often labeled as voiceless.
“I feel like the overwhelming response of the world as it relates to diversity and inclusion has made me step into a different space as it relates to being a black woman. I’m no longer afraid to speak up. I will not sit silent any longer. I love the quote ‘what you permit, you promote.’ That is so true in moving in the spaces I move in.”

“After the murder of George Floyd, companies were developing diversity and inclusion panels and making statements,” she said, referring to the African-American man murdered by police officer Derek Chauvin. “Many people were reaching out to the San Diego Black Nurses Association. It was overwhelming to get asked how to move forward to increase diversity.”

Farr soon realized maybe she was created for such a time as this.

“I believe life puts you exactly where you’re supposed to be. Initially, I wanted to be a surgeon,” she said.

Instead, the Covenant School of Nursing graduate started to dream a new dream and eventually landed as a nurse practitioner.

“Critical care is my passion,” she said. “I work with the most dynamic team of nurses, physicians, and pharmacists. We are family.”

Family was exactly what the mother of an adult daughter needed when she found herself sick right as the pandemic shut down the United States.

“I came back from a conference, and I became very ill. I was hospitalized for five days right around March 13,” she said. “Luckily, I did not have COVID.”

As the pandemic raged around her, Farr found herself acutely ill for about eight weeks. “When I was sick, I felt this need to be at work, but I could not because my body wouldn’t let me,” she said.

It also gave her even more empathy toward those experiencing illness, especially when they aren’t at home.

“This has been a particularly difficult time for patients in hospital and nursing home settings. There was a paradigm shift in how we’re utilizing technology to help us care for each other.”
Working in critical care, families weren’t allowed to be with their loved one. Although we utilized technology during the pandemic, that doesn’t replace physical touch.”

She also experienced first-hand how difficult it was to be alone during this time, but found other outlets as she learned to navigate her new normal of “just me,” where she accepts the position in which she stands and leverages it to ensure and help promote the health and wealth of all whom she serves.

“I protect my personal time and development at all cost. My number one title is mother (and daughter and sister). At times, [nurses] are dehumanized because people see our strength, but they don’t see our pain. They think because we make the load look easy it’s not heavy for us.

“The pandemic has been an emotional time for many African American nurses as we work to care for our community while continuing to deal with systemic racism and the impact it has on healthcare. In addition, we have had to deal with continued racial strife within the U.S. as it relates to racial injustice and health equity.”

Farr is determined to find balance despite the heavy load she and other first responders have to bear.

“I work very hard at having dedicated time away from work. I started to roller skate again. You rediscover the things you loved so much—like being able to read something that wasn’t a medical journal. I started to grow my mind more in subjects other than the nursing field for personal development.

“There are so many ways you can serve. Healthcare, isn’t provided in a silo. I continue to strive to touch my community where they work, live, and worship,” she said. “We have come together more as a community. Although many have suffered loss, our service to each other continues to be the most shining example of community. The unexpected result of the pandemic is that it made us slow down as a country and examine what’s important to us. Even though we spent a lot of time physically distanced, it made us appreciate the time we had together a lot more.”

“We are truly stronger together, and we have to acknowledge the work of everyone and understand if one part of the system falls, we all fall. We all contribute in a meaningful way, no matter what letters we have behind our name.”