AMERICA RESPONDS

Humble heroes

Everyday Americans have made a big impact with even small gestures

Matt Alderton
Special to USA TODAY

Although it affects different people in different ways, COVID-19 typically manifests two to 14 days after exposure with such symptoms as fever, cough and shortness of breath. For anyone who has surveyed its impact on Americans more broadly, however, another symptom of the novel coronavirus has become exceedingly obvious: kindness. In the face a global pandemic that has robbed them of graduations, weddings and vacations — not to mention the more than 100,000 friends, neighbors and relatives whose lives it has claimed — Americans of all ages, professions and backgrounds have responded with acts of goodwill that no one expects but everyone needs. Here are just a few of their stories.

A tent set up by Salerno Medical Associates to handle COVID-19 patients. SALERNO MEDICAL ASSOCIATES

'You hunker down and fight'

Alexander Salerno
SALERNO MEDICAL ASSOCIATES

Dr. Alexander Salerno is a primary care physician with offices in Orange, East Orange and Newark, New Jersey. He inherited his practice, Salerno Medical Associates, from his parents, who established it in the 1950s. After race riots in Newark in 1967, many doctors and business owners fled the city for other, whiter communities. But the Salernos stayed and have been caring for New Jersey's urban poor ever since.

"My parents taught me that when the going gets tough, you don't get up and leave. You hunker down and fight. So that's what we did when COVID-19 hit," Salerno says. His practice began treating COVID-19 patients exclusively in March, when he set up tents outside his offices where clinicians could provide coronavirus triage, testing and treatment.

Testing was especially crucial, Salerno says, because of "silent spreaders" — people who have the virus but are showing no symptoms and transmit it without knowing. So Salerno decided to test everyone he could.

Unfortunately, many people in low-income communities lack transportation to get them to where they can be tested. Salerno therefore spent $42,000 on a van that he turned into a mobile clinic he could park on street corners, outside senior housing and at churches. By June, his team had tested more than 6,000 people in New Jersey's hardest-hit communities.

"Testing is really important, and it has to be done in every nook and cranny of our communities," Salerno says.

Caring conversations

Rahel Teferra
COURTESY OF RAHEL TEFERRA

As a physician at Clark Memorial Health in Jeffersonville, Indiana, Dr. Rahel Teferra works on the front-most lines of the pandemic. When the virus peaked in southern Indiana, she was seeing as many as 20 suspected or confirmed COVID-19 patients a day. Those who most appreciate her presence, however, are her patients' loved ones, whom she personally calls every day since they aren't allowed to visit.

"Families of these patients are scared," Teferra says. "Sometimes conversations are difficult and sad. ... There are stressful conversations, like end-of-life discussions. It can be trying, but it has to be done."

Because some COVID-19 patients must spend more than a month sequestered in the hospital, the daily conversations give family members a sense of routine and connection.

"Family members tell us about what kind of a person their loved ones are, what they did, what hobbies they had. These conversations make me feel I know the person as more than just a patient in a hospital bed at their worst time in their lives," Teferra says. "Families feel reassured knowing that we can have a normal conversation with them — that there is a human being on the other side of the phone who is responsible for the care of their beloved."

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Taylor Smith with other FEMA volunteers. COURTESY OF TAYLOR SMITH

EMT earns an 'A' in empathy

When she was 16, Taylor Smith began volunteering for an emergency medical service near her home in South Jersey. That's when she decided to become a paramedic. Just a few years later, she's studying emergency medicine at the University of Pittsburgh and working as an emergency medical technician in West Mifflin, Pennsylvania.

When COVID-19 hit its peak in the Northeast, the Federal Emergency Management Agency sought volunteers to help meet the increased demand for emergency medical care in New York. Although she was staring finals week in the face, Smith signed up. Just 20 years old, she was among the youngest responders deployed by FEMA to assist ambulance crews in the New York metro area.

"For the first five days, we worked 24-hour shifts with 12 hours off in between," says Smith, who deployed for two weeks in April and took her final exams remotely between shifts.

Although many of her patients did have COVID-19, she says the people she helped most were those who didn't have the virus but were terrified that they might. "A lot of people were really scared but didn't need to be. It was nice that we could reassure them."

As for her finals: She ended the term with a 3.9 GPA — her best semester yet.

Jeramy Ragsdale builds a clear panel through which senior living residents can interact with loved ones. THRIVE SENIOR LIVING

Jeramy Ragsdale
SARA HANNA PHOTOGRAPHY

A clear solution for families

Because COVID-19 is especially dangerous for older adults, Atlanta-based Thrive Senior Living made a difficult decision in March: It would stop allowing visitors at the 17 senior living communities it operates in eight states.

"While closing the communities to visitors was unquestionably the right thing to do, it has been so heartbreaking," founder Jeramy Ragsdale says. "Closing the communities has ripped apart spouses, pulled sons and daughters away from parents, and reduced the precious time that grandparents and great-grandparents have with the next generations."

Although they supported his decision, many family members reached out to Ragsdale to plead for a way to interact with their loved ones — somehow, some way. His solution: "Clear Connection" panels, transparent plexiglass barriers that allow residents and visitors to see each other and interact without coming into contact or breathing the same air. (They speak through phones.)

"We custom-built each Clear Connection panel to fit snugly inside the front doors of each community," Ragsdale says.

He designed and constructed the panels himself with materials from Home Depot. "I enlisted the help of my dad, who is more skilled in this area, and we designed the prototype on graph paper over the phone," he says.

Within 72 hours, Ragsdale had built 10 panels, and by early June he'd finished and installed 15. "There is certainly nothing proprietary about these ... but the moments they've helped foster are truly magical," he says.

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