

Fryeburg family learns how invisible and virulent COVID-19 can be

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By Nicole Carter

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FRYEBURG — COVID-19 is a silent threat. In the words of Maine Center for Disease Control's director Dr. Nirav Shah, it needs only opportunity to spread.

The Orlando family of Fryeburg learned that last month when the virus attacked them, one after the other.

Ryan and Tracy Orlando took every precaution and followed every guideline from the Maine CDC seriously. Their young son, Jake, has not been to school since March. Both parents are able to maintain mostly remote schedules in their technology careers. They've limited their shopping to online and curbside whenever possible. They mask up, wash up and adhere to social distancing.



Members of the Orlando family of Fryeburg, from left, husband Ryan, son Jake and wife Tracy, are recovering from COVID-19. *Submitted photo*

Despite their diligence, COVID-19 came into their home in November, hitting all three.

First it was Ryan, who began feeling its effects three or four days after his exposure. Jake's case was mild, causing him to feel ill only a few days. Tracy Orlando, who was the last to get infected, thought she might die of it.

In an ironic twist, Ryan's infection came at the hands of a function host, a person who took the temperature and handed out a checklist form of COVID symptoms to every volunteer who participated in a daylong event.

Ryan wore a mask throughout the day. The event host had on a face shield, but no mask.

"At first I didn't think much of it, getting sick," Ryan said in a recent interview. "I thought 'it's not a good time to get sick.' It's never a good time though.

"But by the weekend I felt really bad," he said. "We had made plans with friends for the first time since March, to get together, socially distanced, outside around the fire pit. But by Sunday when I woke up feeling the way I did I called my friends and told them not to come. I didn't want to take the chance."

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That evening his symptoms were full-blown: nothing tasted good, he felt awful and just wanted to sleep.

"I couldn't work Monday," he said. "I slept the whole solid day. Then I had terrible sneezing fits and runny nose, I felt achy, my body temperature was a mess. It was way past what a cold feels like and I'd had my flu shot. I went to the hospital and got tested for COVID at their drive-through."

He returned straight home and tried to rest. By 6 a.m. Tuesday he got his test results via email — he had the virus. A doctor called to follow up. By that time he had already started working the phone to let his employer know, also calling friends and family.

"I was very upset, about exposing my family," Ryan said. "I felt wave after wave of worry, figuring out who I had to tell. Even though I work remotely, Thursday I had attended a planning meeting with my co-workers. Some of them got tested themselves because they have young children or care for elderly people. The company I work for was very supportive getting through all that.

"I was also thinking of how I got sick, and the only place I'd been was the event I attended," he said. "It was a long day and many attendees had come through not wearing masks."

By the time contact tracers from the CDC got in touch, Ryan was already well into his own research.

“I was nuts about figuring it out,” he said. “I have investigative training, I used to investigate crimes for Walmart. So I was going through every little detail and I was 100% sure I knew where I’d gotten it. I’d spent hours in a small building with the event host and it was the day he started feeling ill.”

“I emailed to tell him about Ryan being sick,” Tracy said. “And he responded that he knew. He was sorry, he had tested positive too. He already knew where he had picked it up from.”

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In the process of making their calls, the Orlandos learned there was a spike in the town where the event took place, although the CDC stopped short of labeling it a superspreader. But there was no enforcement of health guidelines for any attendees entering the building.

“When I got the diagnosis, it was surreal,” Ryan said. “I had to figure out how a virus from halfway around the world ended up in my little house.”

“We have taken this virus very seriously,” Tracy added. “It’s ironic because we’ve been extremely diligent, and pretty much stayed home since March. My goal was to protect my mother because if she got sick, it’s 100% she would not survive. We were stunned when Ryan got sick.”

Within two weeks of Ryan being exposed to the virus Jake and Tracy were infected too. Feeling unwell, they both got tested. Jake tested positive and Tracy tested false negative, even though she had a slight fever.

Jake had a fever, headaches and congestion and fatigue. He slept through a good part of three days. But his symptoms never registered as more than feeling like he had a cold.

“I felt bad, like it was my fault, but he didn’t get sick enough that we worried,” Ryan said.

“We didn’t think it was possible for me to not get it,” Tracy said. “And I kept declining so I got a second test on Nov. 20, and that one was positive.

“When Jake and I tested, I think I wasn’t shedding enough of the virus for it to show up yet. On Monday I was negative and on Friday I was positive and by then I was really sick. I just had every symptom.”

“It was worrisome,” Ryan said of his wife’s battle. “I’ve never ever seen her feel needy when she’s sick. But every single day she told me she was going to die. That she needed to go to the hospital and it was urgent. It was awful to watch.”

“I went to the emergency room three days after I tested positive,” Tracy said. “I had a hard time breathing. I was vomiting nonstop. I couldn’t keep anything down.”

“It was frightening,” Ryan said.

“We called ahead,” Tracy said. “And they don’t really want people to come in if they don’t have to, because there is a lot that has to happen and it’s a small, rural hospital. I had to be placed in a negative pressure room. They took a chest X-ray through the door so I didn’t have to go into any other spaces.

“I will say that one thing I didn’t like is that every single person there said, ‘we just treat it like the flu. That’s all we can do.’ I understand that, but it gives a mixed message to people who aren’t clear on how this is different than the flu.”

Tracy was given anti-nausea medications and an IV to be hydrated. Her blood oxygen had dipped but was not at the point where she needed to have oxygen. After a few hours she was sent home with more anti-nausea meds and directions to rest, hydrate and keep taking Tylenol for the fever.

“I was frustrated because there was nothing I could do for her until I took her to the hospital,” Ryan said. “I dropped her off and thought she’d be there for the long haul. That’s how bad she felt. But then she called to come pick her up. It was surreal because she was so bad. I didn’t know what I could do about it.”

Once home, Tracy continued to struggle. Ryan was on the mend but not 100% better.

“I think people don’t understand — I didn’t understand — just how bad it is,” Ryan explained. “I had confusion, brain fog. I’d try to communicate but then not find the words. And it was embarrassing for me, I felt like I couldn’t work with customers or do online demonstrations because I was afraid I’d go off the rails. There was loss of smell and taste. All these weird things going on.

“But for Tracy, it was everything I had times ten. Her difficulty breathing. My symptoms were manageable but hers were on max.”

The Orlandos had some equipment on hand from previous illnesses, including a nebulizer and an inhaler. The hospital told Tracy to use those to try and keep her lungs opened up, but nothing worked and added to her frustration. Her fever was up to 103.5 degrees regardless of what she tried taking to lower it. Ryan added his own concoctions to try and help.

“I’ll tell you what worked,” Ryan said. “I’m no doctor or scientist, but anyone who gets this virus needs to have these things on hand. They need to have lots of Tylenol and Tylenol PM because she wasn’t going to get any sleep unless she was knocked out. Mucinex — if you can

take it, take it immediately. I took it early and I believe it helped save me from some of the issues my wife had. And I'm not sure the CDC would endorse this, but CBD oil was a huge help.

"The oil has a calming effect," he said. "She was so sick and so distraught, throwing up so much. She couldn't even take the anti-nausea medicine. When she had the CBD, it gave just enough of a window so I could get the other meds in her system so she could be sustained to rest. It gave enough relief to allow the Tylenol and Mucinex to work."

Tracy went to the hospital only once but she and Ryan both called several times for support.

"One day she was very insistent that she needed an ambulance," Ryan recalled. "She was convinced she would die. She called her mother to write out her will and obituary."

"Tracy was also communicating with her regular doctor, but she was exhausted and felt like she just couldn't keep trying. It was scary, I didn't want to take her back there only for them to send us back home."

Tracy said, "Two and a half weeks after feeling sick, I finally called my doctor and begged for him to give me something. I was feeling worse and worse."

The nurse asked if they had prescribed dexamethasone, which no one had.

Tracy got a prescription for the 14-day steroid treatment and after the first one she started to feel better, she said.

"We bought a pulse oximeter to monitor my oxygen," she said. "We now have every kind of thermometer. It was like triage in our living room."

Ryan talked with an emergency room nurse to ask if he should bring her to the hospital and was told he could call 911 but Tracy would get the same treatment — fluids and anti-nausea.

"It was disheartening," he said. "There was no one to come to help us. No helicopter or team of doctors. No Hydroxichloriquine, no Regeneron, none of the medications reportedly given to high-profile people."

"We were on our own," Ryan said. "They never said to get a pulse oximeter, or supplies that would help. There was no list they gave us for things to monitor."

As Tracy struggled, Ryan became the primary contact for concerned family and friends, another source of stress.

"When they can't see you but they're seeing people being intubated in hospitals on the news, it was important to keep them not worried but be honest with how she was feeling," he said. "I did get push-back, with a few insisting that I needed to get her to the hospital and call 911 immediately."

“But that’s not really the best thing. You call 911 and you get an ambulance crew that has to get in full COVID gear, they come take her to the hospital. They’ve been exposed and need to decontaminate. And there, they’ll give her the fluids and send her home.”

COVID-19 has taken its toll on the family. Neither parent feels 100% healthy. Ryan was sick for two weeks; Tracy severely ill for three weeks and she has lingering bronchial symptoms and fatigue.

“Last night for the first time since this all started I got to hug my mom, since I figured it was safe to do so,” Tracy said. “It’s almost like a relief now because I can see her.”

“It’s important to get this across” Ryan said. “It’s not just — wear a mask and wash your hands for yourself. Wear the mask for others. The reason you wear it is to stop whatever you might have from getting out into the air and infecting someone else.

“It’s a disconnect,” he said. “People need to be selfless for others but people don’t understand and don’t do it. I believe that is why my family got sick. We’d been doing all the right things but I was around people who were not.”

Regarding COVID-19 vaccinations, the family is committed to getting them when they become available.

“Wherever we end up in priority, having already had it, I am 100% supportive of taking the vaccination and have no qualms about doing it,” Ryan said. “It’s an important thing and we all need to take it seriously now.”

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Tracy and Ryan Orlando of Fryeburg before they became infected with COVID-19. *Submitted photo*