

Emily Fawcett, RN, 4/8/21

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Interviewed by Oprah in April 2020, Emily Fawcett, RN, joins us today. She's a nurse at New York City's Lenox Hill Hospital and has been working with Covid patients since the start of the pandemic. Welcome, Emily, thank you so much for joining us today.

EF: Thank you for having me.

KK: Emily, we know your mother is a nurse, but we'd love to know how you got into nursing.

EF: Yeah, so my mom has been a nurse at her hospital in Connecticut for probably close to 40 years at this point so I kind of grew up with that in my household and I heard her stories of taking care of others in the hospital and it's just always something that I always wanted to do. I also was an EMT in high school in my town for our volunteer ambulance service so I had that whole background. But I knew from a very early age that I was a caregiver and you know, kind of looking up to my mother so I only applied to nursing schools when I was applying to college and I just, I knew that nursing was what I was going to do.

VC: So Emily, you were one of 27, I believe, Northwell employees who went to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria and you also did some service work in Africa and worked on the USNS Comfort. Did all of this work, and perhaps your EMT experience, did all of that help prepare you for the pandemic?

EF: For sure. You never think that you know, in the United States, in New York City, at a great hospital, would you be faced with what we saw this past spring and you know, I think all of my mission work abroad, definitely helped to prepare me and just kind of changed my mindset. I mean, we went into true wartime nursing, is the best way I can explain. You know, we were just trying to get through the days to keep our patients safe, keep our patients alive and we did what we had to do and so I think all of my past experiences in my mission work has definitely helped get me through this crazy year mentally and able to just kind of roll with the punches.

KK: At the beginning of the pandemic there were shortages of PPE and between everything that you went through how did you deal with that?

EF: You know, we were definitely scared about the PPE, we were seeing other hospitals and other nurses on the news having to make their own PPE, and they were wearing garbage bags and things like that. We were really lucky at Lenox Hill, you know, being part of Northwell, a big health care system, that we never really had any shortages of PPE. Usually an N95 mask is a one-time use, so we did have to wear the same N95 for about a week unless it was soiled. I feel so grateful I had access to gloves and gowns and N95s though next week we might have to share an N95 respirator mask and we just have to mentally go there because we don't know what's going to happen, and masks and we need to be prepared for the worst. But luckily it never got to that point for us.

VC: The pandemic started last March when New York was the epicenter and it has gone through a bit of a trajectory since then. So could you just take us through that trajectory and tell us what your work has been like?

EF: My hospital got our first Covid patient back in March of 2020 and very quickly just about the entire hospital turned into Covid. Just about every single floor except maybe one was for Covid patients. You know, at the height I probably took care of maybe 300-350 Covid patients in the hospital at any given time, and I'm a float nurse so I was floating all around to all the different Covid units. I would be in the emergency room some days I would be up on the Covid ICU step down, some days I would be on the actively dying floor, some days the palliative floor so I saw a lot from a lot of different views. And then we saw the numbers go down in this summer, we had a little break, I took a little bit of time off, it was great, things felt like they were getting back to normal, the hospital was getting back to normal, and then we saw the second surge this fall, and being a float nurse I was staffing these Covid units the whole time so, I don't know, the second surge, I took it a little bit harder I think than the first one, it was more emotional for me, brought up some anxieties and emotions and a little bit of PTSD. So it was hard. December was hard, January was hard, February was hard, but finally now we're right about below 30 Covid patients in the hospital, we're down to two Covid units at Lenox Hill so there is some relief coming, I feel it, so we're getting there.

KK: During this time or after what have you done for yourself to help you get through this?

EF: You know, I cry—I'm getting emotional now thinking about it—you know, I cry and I think about the patients and I think about their families and I talk about them to my co-workers and that helps get through all of this. It's not just bodies to us; it's not just numbers to us. Its people, we get to know them, we get to know their families. Talking about our feelings is definitely helpful and then going home to Connecticut once things got a little bit better, seeing my family was very helpful, working out, doing things like that, going for walks now that the weather is getting warmer has definitely helped my morale and has helped me feel better.

KK: Did that also make you start Hope Huddles, which you need to explain to everybody listening, and that's when you were featured on Oprah—tell us what that was all about.

EF: Back in the height last spring things were so desperate at the hospital. We were just grasping at straws. It was incredibly scary. We all thought we were all going to get sick and every emotion runs through your mind. It was just a horrible, horrible time. And if you weren't in it in the hospital the things we saw and went through were just unimaginable. But being a float nurse I was going around to the different floors so I was actually lucky to see stories of recovery happening. Yes, we saw a lot of death and a lot of hardship, a lot of really horrible sad things but there were also these beautiful stories of people being on ventilator for two weeks and we didn't think they had a chance and then they woke up and were reunited with their family. So it was these stories that were just, you know, getting us through. Even if we just had one success story that for me was enough to keep going, to know that all of our efforts weren't in vain, and so I started Hope Huddles as a way to spread these stories of hope and recovery and positive outcomes at the hospital to all the staff because I think it was really

important for everyone to hear that people were living, we were saving people and so it was just to keep that positive morale going throughout the hospital and to share these beautiful stories of recovery.

VC: So what exactly is Hope Huddles? Did you all gather during the shift change to share these stories? How did that work?

EF: So we would gather at the shift change, sometimes even mid shift if I thought someone on a particular floor needed a boost of morale and we would share these stories of recovery. So I remember the emergency room was hit really hard. They were the true, true front lines, and they just saw these patients come in, sick patient after sick patient, and they would incubate them, put them on life support, and send them upstairs and they assumed most of them died. They never heard what happened to all of these people. And I could tell, I was on a late night text thread with some emergency room nurses. These are some tough, tough New York City ER nurses and they were so distraught, so distraught and they were crying, and it just, I had to find a way to get that information back to them so my first Hope Huddle was actually held in the emergency room and I had a nurse from upstairs come down and share some beautiful stories. I think there was a 20 year old who was on a ventilator who made it off and the whole emergency room remembered this patient and they were all clapping and cheering and it was so important for them to hear these stories of people recovering and going home and making it. So yeah, it was just these little huddles and sometimes it was formal and sometimes it was really informal and quick and it just, it brightened everyone's day because you know, it's so many patients but we remember them, you know, we remember their names. So it was important to hear that some of them were getting better.

VC. Do you still do this?

EF: Yes, I'm still trying to keep it going, it's definitely at a smaller scale, it's more informal, but you know, the other day I was working on a Covid floor and I was sending home a gentleman in his 40s who had been on life support and on a ventilator and he was walking out of the hospital so I actually ran up the stairs to the Covid ICU and I announced to everyone that Mr. so and so was going home today and they were so happy and it was just, you know, it gives us all a smile, it gives us a little pep in our step and keeps us going.

KK: This is just amazing that you were able to do this. You have to tell us, how did Oprah find out about Hope Huddles?

EF: I know, crazy, right? So Katie Couric actually posted on her Instagram a little, a little post about my Hope Huddles saying "Oh, I love this, what this New York City nurse is doing and so I guess Oprah and her team got wind of my Hope Huddles so next thing I know it's just growing into this big thing, and Oprah's producers are contacting me and I got to be interviewed by Oprah herself which was just unbelievable. It was just a great, great experience and so surreal.

VC: That's great, and I think it really gave a lot of well-deserved promotion to the Hope Huddles. Going back to patient care, how has patient care evolved since the start of the

pandemic? You guys have learned more about the disease, obviously, so how has that affected your patient care?

EF: The protocols for taking care of Covid patients have definitely evolved and changed. We were doing things back in March that we're not doing any more. That has changed and that's ever evolving. But for me personally as a nurse the thing that changed the most was I had to step in as these patients' families. We don't allow visitors for Covid 19 patients and I think it's one of the most vulnerable times in these patients' lives and so for me I'm used to having families there to hold their family member's hand and to cry with them and laugh with them and all of a sudden I have all these incredibly sick patients and no families. So I was truly their family and I think that was the biggest change for me as I had to truly step up and be there for the patients, the families, hold their hand, cry with them, laugh with them, and celebrate every little gain that they had. So that was kind of the biggest change for me.

KK: I know we all respect nurses and doctors and we all did our, especially in New York, or around the world, our 7:00 clapping, that must have helped a little bit too, I'm sure.

EF: Yes, yes. The 7:00PM clap was just, you know, if you're in the city at that time it was probably the coolest thing to experience. We were all so isolated and in quarantine in our apartments and you know, we're not heroes, I always say the patients and the families are the heroes in the story but it just, it felt so good to have everyone come together, cheer us on, know that they supported us. We were locked away in the hospital in full PPE gear, working our butts off, so it was really nice to be able to come out, get a cool, fresh breath, fresh air on my face, and hear everyone's cheering and clapping at 7:00PM every day. It was so, so special.

KK: You certainly deserved it.

VC: Yeah, it was a beautiful thing and I know as a "clapper," it was just a ritual that at least in my neighborhood, everybody kind of went to their windows and in some cases we opened our windows so I think it was kind of a support all around.

EF: I agree, I think it helped the entire city, not just health care workers.

KK: New Yorkers always come together in the end. Isn't that true?

EF: Yeah, it's true.

VC: How has the advent of the vaccines affected your work, your patient load, are you seeing patients that are coming in as sick, or not?

EF: You know, as more and more of us get vaccinated we are seeing a difference. Again, our numbers have drastically dropped; we're below 30 Covid positive patients at my hospital currently which is amazing. Two months ago we were pushing 90 so I think the volume has decreased. I think people are less sick, but you know, we're still losing patients every week, every day. So it still hits very close to home. It doesn't matter if it's one patient, it's still one patient. So I think we all just kind of have to be a little more patient until we hit that, you

know, herd immunity and more people get vaccinated but it's bringing us, it's bringing me hope. Good things are to come with this vaccine. Things are changing, I feel it, I see the light, we're so, so close, and I just think we have to hold on a little bit longer and we'll get there and we'll start to see things get drastically better for us.

KK: Do you agree with the health experts, the CDC, what are your feelings about opening or re-opening New York, restaurants and the gyms at 50% together when we're hearing that there's going to be a new surge?

EF: Yeah, I'm someone who likes to err on the side of caution and I think we kind of should just hold tight now until more people are vaccinated. You know, I've been through hell, these patients and families have been through hell for a year and I would like to see us hold tight just for a little bit longer. I know we're all eager to get back to life, but what is normal life any more? I think that that has changed. I don't know if we'll ever be normal again. And so I would like to see the vaccination numbers go up a little bit more before we really, truly start to open up and people still have to be safe even though they're vaccinated—social distancing, hand hygiene, mask wearing, we still have a road ahead of us, so...

VC: What is your take on the latest, these pronouncements change, who knows, by the time this is published maybe there will be some other new pronouncement from the CDC and other experts, but in terms of travel, they are now saying that OK, people who are fully vaccinated, you're OK to travel, meaning let's say if you want to go visit the grandchildren it's OK to do that if they're healthy, etc., and...but, non-essential travel is not recommended. So do you see this as a contradiction? What's your opinion on that?

EF: Yeah, a little bit and I think it creates a lot of confusion for people and for Americans and again, I understand people want to get back to normal, they want to see their family and their loved ones and they want to travel again and there's a safe way to do it, right, making sure you're vaccinated if you have access to the vaccine, wearing your mask, testing before and after travel, all of that will help us get back to where we want to be and there is a way to start to travel, start to do your normal things safely.

VC: What is your greatest post-pandemic wish?

EF: I think that this pandemic—I mean I will never forget watching the news in China last December or January and thinking, this virus will never come to us. How naïve were we to think that we were untouchable and you know, as horrible as this whole thing has been I think it's changed a lot of people. It made people more focused on their families and their loved ones. I think it helped highlight what's truly important in life and these connections, I think we're forever changed and I don't want to change back. We're all human beings and connections and taking care of one another. Having New York City clap for us at 7:00PM and take care of their health care workers, like we need to continue to do that and continue to take care of each other and realize that all these little things in life are really not that important and to focus on truly what's important. So I think my wish is just that we don't ever really go back to how we were.

KK: You're really touching everybody, reminding us of what is important.

EF: Thank you.

VC: Exactly. Exactly. So Emily, thank you so much for being with us today and sharing your experiences. You are a hero. You and your colleagues, you are heroes and thank you, thank you for everything that you do.

EF: Thank you; it's an honor to talk to you ladies and thank you for sharing our stories. It feels good to talk about all of this stuff. It's therapeutic.