

FEATURE

# CH nurse shares pandemic experience



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DANIELLE MCNALLY

Karen Schaller of Clarendon Hills is a pediatric nurse practitioner at Advocate Children's Hospital in Oak Lawn.

Karen Schaller of Clarendon Hills, a pediatric nurse practitioner and member of the Clarendon Hills chapter of the Infant Welfare Society of Chicago auxiliary, describes her professional and personal experience during the Coronavirus pandemic.

### On volunteer work with Clarendon Hills Infant Welfare

I became involved with Clarendon Hills Infant Welfare (CHIW) after meeting Cammie Horan [of Clarendon Hills] through a previous nursing position.

We stayed in touch, and have since become good friends, and are now both members of CHIW.

At her encouragement, I

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**Karen Schaller of Clarendon Hills, a pediatric nurse practitioner, on life during the lockdown**

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joined, met all the wonderful women of the chapter, and have now been a member for two years.

I am so proud of each and every member's devotion and tireless hard work—especially because everyone

is juggling kids, responsibilities at home and careers as well.

In joining, I was also made aware that the Angel Harvey clinic our chapter sup-

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ports was where some of my prior patients received primary-care services, and I couldn't have been happier to support them in another capacity.

**On separating personal from professional life during the height of the pandemic**

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Like many parents, I was struggling to keep up with turning in assignments, Zoom calls and keeping him focused, while also juggling two younger children, and trying to keep my mind away from the hospital on my days off.

I got to a point where I couldn't turn on the news anymore, and found comfort in watching funny health-

care/nurse humor videos on TikTok.

**On diverting the mind from work**

I talked daily with my friends, some of whom are nurses and mothers, and understood my stress from work and home-schooling.

**On being a nurse practitioner during the Coronavirus pandemic**

I have been a pediatric nurse practitioner for nine years, and have never seen anything like what it has been like to work during the Coronavirus pandemic.

I switched employers to work at Advocate Children's Hospital [in Oak Lawn] in February of this year—and a month later, COVID-19 hit.

It was overwhelming to say the least.

I went from walking around my new hospital, trying to find my way and smiling at patients in a hus-

tle-and-bustle environment, to walking through a virtual ghost-town.

It was an eerie feeling to barely pass anyone in the hallways.

Non-essential staff were working from home; health-care teams followed social distancing [protocols] and stayed at least six feet apart; we virtually dialed-in providers for Zoom rounds; and masks were mandatory for all [personnel].

There were discussions about deployment to the emergency department, drive-thru COVID testing, and how we could support the needs of our patients in any capacity.

I, like most, felt the call of duty, and wanted to help in any way possible.

I know I can't speak for everyone, but I found myself wanting to work more and harder during the pandemic.

The thought of leaving or quitting never crossed my

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**Karen Schaller**

mind.

Yes, I had to come up with my own post-work cleaning routine to ensure the safety and health of my family, but [I would] do it again in a heartbeat.

We all continue to perform these selfless acts daily to attest to why we went into healthcare in the first place.

I kept seeing news images and stories from around the country and globe about ventilator shortages. PPE short-

ages, healthcare workers in unimaginable circumstances and, most heartbreakingly, patients dying.

I started talking "crazy" to families and friends about rumblings about what was to come, and I secretly panicked about how I could keep everyone I loved safe.

I worried there wouldn't be enough hospital beds, tests or masks, and I prepared for having to stay entirely inside.

I ordered a month's supply of diapers and baby food, and prepared to hunker down, ready to leave only to drive to work, and thinking I would have to display my badge to prove that I was an essential worker.

I have felt very lucky during the pandemic, as Advocate Aurora Health has been quick to support us by providing adequate PPE, determining the best staffing situations and ways to socially-distance within our department, and ensuring we can do what is best for our patients, which is always the utmost goal.

Routine or follow-up appointments turned into virtual visits and remain as such, as we try to do our part in minimizing patients' and families' risks of coming to the hospital.

Elective procedures were postponed.

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Schaller, left, attended the Clarendon Hills Infant Welfare benefit with fellow pediatric nurse and chapter member Cammie Horan, right, also of Clarendon Hills.

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Visiting restrictions remain in place, with one parent at the bedside, which—speaking as a parent myself—I know can be unimaginably hard when your child is sick.

I think the hardest part in the beginning [was] the unknowns: will there be enough PPE? are there enough tests? who will get a test? what will happen one week, one month or even one year from now, until a vaccine is developed? are we safe from contracting the virus?

This latter question is what I struggle with both in and out of the hospital, for my three children's sake and the sake of my mother, who is a cancer survivor.

I still worry about spreading the virus to them when I find my mind wandering to what is to come. ...

I, like many, have been through the swine flu, bird flu, SARS and Ebola thus far in my nursing career, but COVID-19 is a new monster that still proves very difficult to control.

I feel lucky in the sense that pediatric patients were not hit as hard as higher-risk populations, but children have also been found to be asymptomatic carriers, and I still certainly saw very sick children hospitalized during this crisis with COVID complications.

I have devoted my 13-year nursing career to pediatric patient safety, but I am now in a position where I can't be sure my patients will be safe from a global pandemic.

I feel helpless.

There have certainly been stressful days, as fewer staff members are on-site, and I try to keep up as a still-new

employee; but I felt and continue to feel supported by my team, supervisor and organization.

This support allows me to continue to practice in the capacity I feel is best for my patients.

Luckily, my organization, physicians, colleagues and teammates all banded together, and developed processes and systematic ways to ensure we can continue to offer the best quality care to our patients and support our families during this uncertain time.

If anything, I think the pandemic has brought about a tighter-knit community of healthcare workers, and given us a greater sense of pride in providing relentless, devoted care day in and day out.