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How Covid Landed me in my 'Retirement' Job

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In February of 2020, the nursing profession took on a whole new identity. With the dawn of Covid-19, after over twelve years in acute care nursing, I began to see patients ten times sicker than any others I'd ever seen before. My home unit, 10W CCU, was the first unit to take care of a critically ill Covid-19 patient at UCSDH Hillcrest. There were countless unknowns not only about how to protect ourselves, but also how to care for these incredibly sick people.

In the beginning we were intubating and sedating patients early and often to help them breathe. They also responded incredibly well to proning which involves lying patients on their stomach/torso for periods of about 16

hours at a time. This was both incredibly interesting and unfathomably physically demanding. Despite the absolute best efforts of an exceptional team the morgue felt like it was overflowing on any given shift in a way I'd never seen before. It felt like the world's most grim game of Tetris and there was no end in sight.

Initially visitors were not allowed to see family members who'd tested positive for Covid-19 and I began to lose track of how many patient's hands I held taking their last breath while their loved ones were stuck outside the hospital walls. The outpouring of support from the community during the pandemic quarantine arrived in the form of thank you cards, warm meals,



Jessy Gaines, RN, BSN, PCCN grew up in New Haven, CT and studied nursing at Quinnipiac University. She has been working at UCSDH since 2011, starting on 10E Telemetry, moving to 4AB SCVC PCU, 10W CCU, and finally KOP outpatient PreOp/PACU. She enjoys spending downtime with her husband DJ, 1 yr old son Luther, and her three crazy dogs Trixie, Travi, and Trudy.



Jessy and her amazing CCU Preceptors Gina, RN and Julissa, RN when she started in ICU.



The incredible CCU staff members on
Jessy's last shift before moving to PACU.

and appreciation celebrations downtown. This did make me feel like a hero and kept me getting out of bed in the morning. Unfortunately, it did not, however, stop me from coming home from each emotionally taxing work day to let the hot shower water wash the tears down my cheeks that I'd been forced to hold in all day just so I could make it home in one piece. While there is so much I remember painfully clear from this time frame in my career there is even more I blocked out completely just to preserve as much of my emotional well-being as was humanly possible.

I had often considered making the Post Anesthesia Care Unit (PACU) my 'retirement' nursing job when I was further along in my career but would never have imagined making that transition after only three years of ICU nursing. I learned so much working in critical care and it was truly the most humbling and exciting three years in my career to date. The people I worked

with became like family and I experienced quite a bit of guilt for taking a job elsewhere and leaving the CCU work family I grew to love so much behind. The way they could anticipate each other's needs, step up to help without judgement when someone was having a challenging day and find a way to make you smile even after the most difficult moments is not something I will ever forget.

After just a short time in outpatient PACU my mental health started to improve in a way I didn't even realize I so desperately needed. It's no secret that most ICU patients are at one point intubated and sedated but I built a connection by talking to them each shift as if they were wide awake. Once everyone was prone during Covid-19 and I was forced to talk to the back of people's heads I became disconnected from what I loved about nursing; building trust with my patients and making them feel safe and cared for. It wasn't until a few months working

outpatient PACU where I was talking with patients again, appeasing their anxiety with laughter and compassion that I realized it wasn't too early for me to 'retire to PACU' after all. It was exactly what I needed at the exact time I needed it to give me the longevity I hoped to have in this career.

Nursing during the Covid-19 pandemic was debilitating at times, rewarding at others, but ultimately wasn't sustainable for me. My current job is admittedly less adrenaline pinching most days but I sleep better, spend all weekends and holidays with my family and feel just as fulfilled professionally, if not more. I'm not as much of an adrenaline junky as some of my former ICU peers and looking back I'm not surprised my career took this trajectory. But given how much I was learning and how much I absolutely adored my peers in CCU I do wonder from time to time how long I would have stayed if Covid times never came.