

Doing her duty in difficult times: a Lindsay nurse's story

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Trying to maintain calm in the eye of a pandemic storm is the balance that all front line workers have to find.

For Monica Petras, the key to keeping her cool is supportive family and coworkers and taking the time to take care of herself during these uncertain times.

As a nurse at Caressant Care in Lindsay, Petras has to think about every move she makes now, considering the possible repercussions of her actions.

“I literally come home from work, I change into my bathrobe in my garage and leave my work clothes in a hamper out there,” she says.

“My family won't allow me to go anywhere, because we don't want me to potentially carry anything into the community.”

But Petras is one of the lucky ones who has family like her husband, Frank, who shops for three households, to take care of things outside the home to protect not only the community, but also the vulnerable residents she works with.

“I think most of the worry, whether you work in the hospital or long-term care or not, is for the most vulnerable members of your family.”

With lots of family in Northern Italy, Petras is emotional when she reflects on the sheer scale of the tragedy there, essentially wiping out the older generation and overwhelming the entire health-care system.

“People were sick, and they weren't sending them to the hospital, because they knew they wouldn't ever see them again. They would die alone in the hospital.”

With updates from her cousins, including one family member who contracted the virus but has since recovered, Petras has been tracking the spread of the virus from early on. While she thinks Canada has learned some of the lessons Italy has to offer, the nurse is critical of her country's response to the pandemic in many ways.

“As a human being, I'm very disappointed with my levels of government and the poor planning that has gone into things like ventilators and PPE [personal protective equipment].”

Having been through the SARS outbreak in 2003, Petras says she wonders why the provincial and federal governments weren't better prepared for COVID-19.

Petras contacted the office of MPP Laurie Scott and was sent an online PPE request form, but adds, “... that was no help because there is no PPE available to order.”

Efforts to produce and stock up on PPEs should have ramped up seven weeks ago,

says Petras, adding that she believes travel should have been shut down a lot sooner as well.

“There will be a lot of questions afterward regarding the decisions that have been made. There will be a reckoning.”

The nurse is also dismayed at reports that Ontario is under testing for the virus.

“I think this is an attempt to keep the numbers of infected people artificially low, so it looks like the government is doing its job and “flattening the curve.” When actually the real numbers of infections are much greater than what they are reporting.”

Petras adds that she knows people personally who were told at an assessment centre they have the virus, but not tested and therefore not a part of the official numbers.

“Lying to us is not helping us or protecting us.”

Petras has worked at Caressant Care in Lindsay for almost 14 years, in several departments. Although she works mostly in funding now, Petras adds that since the COVID-19 pandemic, she has been helping out with floor shifts like many of her colleagues in other departments like housekeeping and dietary, to provide additional support where needed.

“I work with really great PSWs and nurses, they are a wonderful group of people,” she says.

Petras says she is lucky that the morale at Caressant remains relatively good, with colleagues trying to boost each other up and bring some levity to the situation.

“We’re not really down. People are really just generally concerned about their family members and about the residents, of course,” she says.

“I know staff have been very supportive of each other, so that’s very important.”

Petras' heart has been touched by the love shown by the family members of the residents she works with — in whatever way they can — as well as their appreciation for the job she does.

“I think everybody is, just like their family members are very thankful that we are there with them, because we’ve all got to get through this together.”

There has also been support shown from the community, including a cavalcade of vehicles of cars that has paraded past the long-term care home.

“It makes you feel good and it makes you feel that we haven’t been forgotten.”

Support helps, but self-care remains incredibly important for the well-being of front-line workers during the pandemic. For Petras, walking through the cedars on her property, starting her seedlings in her greenhouse, connection to her faith and church family as well as simply drinking herbal tea with ingredients grown and foraged herself, are just a few ways to find some inner peace.

Petras also recommends taking advantage of online resources to proactively understand how to improve your own health. Her personal favourites are [Hatha Yoga for the Breath and Lungs](#) free on YouTube from a Woodville yoga instructor and

[blogs on healthy immunity](#) from herbalist Michael Vertolli.

“It’s very kind of people who have been offering some of their services online, I’ve really appreciated that,” she says.

“Just try to be grateful for what we have and take care of it a little bit better. And not just our bodies, but also each other and our mental well-being.”