

# THE FAMILY EFFECT

East parent David VonDrehle comes down with COVID-19, only for his family to come out of it stronger than before

by | annabelle moore

It was considered a good day for father, husband and Washington Post columnist David VonDrehle if he could muster up the strength to cinch his hoodie over his head and make his way out to the oversized loveseat in the family room. Or even if he was in the mood to eat breakfast in the mornings, his wife Karen said.

After a week of dry coughs and heavy fatigue, it dawned on David that he might have the novel virus he'd been reading about in the morning news. He could have COVID-19. But his temperature was normal, and you can't have COVID-19 without a fever, right?

David even went out to buy a high-end thermometer to be sure nothing was wrong. For the first few days, it read him at the textbook, normal human body temperature: 97.5 degrees. No fever. Nothing. He continued to write these symptoms off as spring allergies or a possible oncoming flu.

It wasn't until five days after David's first, mild to moderate symptoms appeared on Mar. 16 that he woke up feeling extremely feverish, tired and achy. His new symptoms painted an almost perfect picture of someone suffering COVID-19.

The two or more weeks he spent battling it were grueling for him and his family, but their cohesiveness and support system was what got him through the novel COVID-19.

"It was [around day five or day six], when [David] started walking around with the hoodie over his head and taking his temperature more often, and then later that night I saw this [doctor] on TV who tested positive and had mild symptoms, I thought, 'Oh gosh, this could be COVID-19,'" Karen said.

After realizing David's symptoms were likely of COVID-19, she spent more than eight hours on the phone trying to find somewhere — from their family's primary care physician to hospitals and emergency rooms all over the city — that would test or check David out.

None of the places Karen called would offer a test due to the shortage and David's only 'mild symptoms,' but St. Luke's Community Hospital off 132nd and State Line was willing to have a doctor check him out.

The hospital instructed David to stay in the parking lot in his car, taking his information over the phone. A doctor and nurse, both in masks, came out to the lot with a cart. The doctor took his vital signs and instructed him to put the mask on, in his car, so he could get out for them to check his breathing.

"That's when [the doctor] said you know, given your symptoms, I think you have it, but we're not going to give you a test," David said. "She was very nice, but she just sent me home to lock myself away."

David still doesn't know where he may have picked up the virus. Did he touch the wrong door at Price Chopper? Or the wrong ATM machine? David works and writes his columns from the solidity of his home. He was also carefully following hand washing and social distancing precautions to protect Karen, who suffers from multiple sclerosis. This disease attacks her immune system.

After going to the doctor, David immediately went home to self-quarantine in his room, away from his wife and two

daughters who still live at home (his son and oldest daughter don't). David is 59-years-old and in good health, so he and his family never feared death. But this virus still had his teeth chattering, under layers and layers of covers.

"The worst [moments of COVID-19] were at night," David said. "I had several nights when it seemed like I was drifting in and out of sleep and these weird, troubled dreams, feeling like I was going to freeze to death. But I was too weak and too tired to take any medicine or anything, to do anything about it."

David had dreams of being on an ice-cold ranch riding a horse, only to somehow fall off and be walked on by the horse, unable to stand up.

Karen slept in the same bed as David for the entirety of his illness. They knew this was risky, given Karen's underlying condition, but she figured she was already exposed long before they knew it was COVID-19.

For Karen, the long nights were also fearful.

"His breathing was so uneven — it was like a rattle, rattle, rattle followed by a deeper groan from his chest," Karen said. "Then it would also look like he wasn't breathing at all, but after a moment, he would breathe easily for several minutes, then the rattles would start again."

Karen remembers times in the night when David would wake up in an almost-delirious state, in-and-out of sleep, mumbling about how he is useless in consoling his daughters during this hard time.

"And that frightened me because he's a caretaker [of this family], he is almost too much," Karen said. "He's almost an enabler. But [due to]

COVID-19], he felt helpless because my two daughters mourned the end of the school year."

One of his three daughters, junior Clara VonDrehle, was supposed to go on the choir trip, with David as a chaperone. She was supposed to have a solo, singing in beautiful ancient cathedrals across Europe. His other daughter, Addie, a freshman at Mizzou, was robbed of a full freshman year. And as for his other two kids who no longer live at home, they had needs of their own — yet weren't allowed in the house for the two weeks he was sick to prevent further exposure. If they needed something, Karen or one of the girls would put it out in the garage for them.

As for Karen, multiple sclerosis limits her mobility, so she is used to David taking care of her. David normally does the laundry and dishes, and will be the one to grab something off the tall cupboard when Karen needs it. She said that David usually goes to sleep after her, and wakes up before her — jumping out of bed to make her coffee before she has the chance to.

While David was tucked away under layers of covers in their bed, Karen missed "morning coffee with Dave," along with reading the news together.

Now, over 16 days later, David is finally seeing the end of this monster virus, as Karen coined it. David has been going on walks around his neighborhood to get fresh air, yet still keeping his distance from everyone else.

"The first day he wanted to go for a walk, I thought, 'Okay, okay this is the light at the end of the tunnel, he's going to be okay,'" Karen said. "We met the dragon and we slayed him because David wants to go for a walk. He has enough energy to do that. That was the moment."

Through battling COVID-19, David has witnessed an even stronger sense of family and community in his circle. David's neighbors have been taking great care of him, bringing him food and meals and encouragement.

"People have been amazing," David said. "My readers, too — I've gotten hundreds of emails encouraging me, so that's all been great."

Karen sees that as one of the biggest tokens their family will take out of this: the assurance that people take care of each other when they're down. She believes that's an important lesson for her girls to learn.

The rest of the family is hopeful they're part of that 80% of the population that will never show symptoms of COVID-19, especially given Karen's disease. They are now past the incubation period of being exposed to David's case.

Karen and David are finally having their morning coffee together again, hopeful people can see the severity of COVID-19.

"If it can flatten a man as healthy as David VonDrehle, it can flatten anybody," Karen said. "I would just want people to know that it's a monster bug, and that don't pretend it's the flu — it's something way worse than the flu, exponentially."

