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MASKED HERO — Arianna Delucchi, a 23-year-old SC nursing student, ministers to COVID-19 patients at Sharp Memorial Hospital. An SC Student of Distinction Award recipient, Delucchi has seen horror and miracles working with critically-ill patients.

FRONTLINE STUDENT

So. County COVID crisis forces nursing students into perilous situations

BY ANA PAOLA OLVERA
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In February, 23-year-old SC nursing student Arianna Delucchi applied to Sharp Memorial Hospital.

In March all Hell broke loose.

Delucchi was informed that the unit she was hired to work in had been frantically converted into a COVID-19 Overflow ICU. She was given two options: to join the front lines of the novel coronavirus war or

to wait until COVID-19 passed over. Delucchi immediately joined.

It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, she said, a great time to start working in medicine. It was also a rare chance for a young medical professional to make an instant impact during an international crisis.

"I was excited for (the opportunity) and to get my foot in the door to start building my foundation so I could become a good nursing assistant

and eventually become a really good nurse," she said.

Her colleagues insist that Delucchi is officially "a really good nursing assistant" with a brilliant future.

Lexie Volquez, a nurse at Sharp Memorial Hospital, said Delucchi has become a battle-worn front-line warrior against the plague of the 21st century at a tender age. She has already assumed many of the responsibilities typical nursing

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Nurse: SC student volunteers to serve in COVID ward as disease spreads

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students may not be trusted with for years.

Delucchi said she was introduced to the world of nursing when she was 10. Her aunt had Stage 4 melanoma and she would visit her at the hospital every day after school. She was deeply moved by the devotion of the nurses, she said.

"They were smart, kind, loving, compassionate, empathetic — just all things amazing," she said. "And I know that the situation was pretty terrible, but they took really really good care of her and took really good care of my family."

Delucchi said she wanted to be like them.

Volquez said she is.

Chula Vista and the South County have been a COVID-19 hotspot since the spring, but Volquez said the tsunami of patients started slowly. In March, each nurse had one patient under their care. Then two, then three, then four.

It was surreal, Volquez said, the first time she walked into a COVID-19 patient's room.

"I was very nervous," she said. "(It was unnerving) just to think that this virus that originated (across the Pacific) Ocean was right there in front of me."

Delucchi agreed. COVID-19 is on its way to killing 300,000 Americans — perhaps as many as 500,000 by February 2021, according to CDC estimates. In February 2020 few saw it coming. It flipped the United States upside down and flung the nursing profession into chaotic exhaustion.

Even student nurses like Delucchi are being leaned on heavily by a fraying medical system. In addition to classes and training, she spends three nights a week at the hospital working 7 p.m. - 7:30 a.m.

She starts each evening by putting on her hospital-issued scrubs and Personal Protection Equipment (face shields, masks and gloves). Next she receives her patients' reports before launching out to visit each patient and ask if they need anything.

Delucchi helps them bathe, shave, eat and walk around their rooms. She also assists senior nurses with an array of medical procedures.

Nights are long, lonely and often scary for COVID-19 patients. They are isolated in their rooms and no one is allowed to visit. They can only talk to their loved ones via FaceTime or Zoom. Nurses are the sole source of direct human contact for a critically-ill COVID patient.

Biological science goes only so far. The art of conversation is also an essential skill of a great nurse, Delucchi said, and she tries to find topics that help provide a little happiness.

"Having the virus can be pretty miserable," she said. "It's nice to see them smile for once by just having a conversation with them."

One of Delucchi's patients had been hospitalized for several days and thought he would be going home until he got bad news -- his oxygen levels slipped and he needed to stay at least one more night.

Delucchi eased the disappointed by talking to him about dogs.

She told him funny stories about her sister's boyfriend's family dog and he told her about how his wife had sent him a bag full of his dog's hair. They laughed and he thanked her, saying that even though he was disappointed, she had made him feel a little bit better.

Sometimes a nurse needs to calm a patient when stress can add fuel to a bad situation. Lack of oxygen is a primal fear for many COVID-19 patients, Delucchi said. Some run out of breath simply trying to speak. Nurses have to help desperate patients avert panic and stay calm while their bodies try to fight off the virus.

Delucchi had one shift where they had to transfer three patients to the Progressive Care Unit because they had suddenly stopped responding to their oxygen therapy. She watched as a patient's oxygen level suddenly dropped on the monitor. An adequate level is 93 percent, she said, but even as nurses tried to provide the patient with more

oxygen, the number would hover at 88 and 89. Intubation for a ventilator is generally started when the oxygen level slips below 85 percent.

"There are a lot of patients who are just convinced that they're going to die and it's hard to hear, you know, and it's hard to see them struggling," she said.

An SC Student of Distinction Award recipient and 4.0 student, Delucchi used to be a power study leader for Professor of Biology Valerie Pennington's Anatomy and Physiology class. Pennington said Delucchi transcends what one would expect from even an extraordinary student. It is her unfailingly generous spirit, Pennington said, and her drive to help others.

"Arianna's got a wisdom about her that doesn't correlate with her age," she said. "I expect great things from her."

So does Volquez, who nominated her for Sharp Memorial Hospital's Employee of the Month. She said Delucchi goes above and beyond for the unit, and her inquisitive mind is always ready to absorb new information.

As the COVID-19 cases started to go down in the South County, half of Delucchi's unit returned to caring for other patients. Many of those patients, however, have been getting sicker than before, she said. Effects of the novel coronavirus are sometimes dramatic, but often dangerously subtle and not readily detected.

Working at a COVID-19 unit is dangerous. More than 1,000 American doctors and nurses have died from the disease. Data about the number of medical workers sickened by COVID-19 is incomplete, but the Center for Disease Control estimated in August that the 120,000 cases reported to the agency was likely a fraction of the true number. Delucchi said she knows her mission is perilous and takes meticulous precautions not to accidentally spread the virus.

If only the rest of society were so conscientious.

Social media drains her, she said, because it is rife with images of thoughtless Americans behaving recklessly. Scrolling through her feed unleashes a depressing scroll of people partying obliviously, not wearing masks or incorrectly wearing masks under their noses.

It is frustrating for exhausted health care workers to watch this cavalcade of carelessness and callous, Delucchi said, when they spend most of their waking hours trying to keep people alive or watching them suffocate to death as the virus fills their lungs with fluids. Young people are not exempt from COVID-19 despite fallacious social media messages, she said. Teens and twenty-somethings also die horribly from the coronavirus, she warned. She has seen it.

"I don't want that for those people and I don't want people to pass it on to someone who maybe won't fare as well," she said.

Pennington said most of her students are working in COVID-19 units. They tell her it is hard to accept that people have politicized a virus and call COVID-19 a hoax, especially when they are putting their lives on the line.

"Our health care workers are out there risking their own lives and doing incredible things every day, yet there are people (who say) 'It doesn't matter. It's not real. I'm not going to wear a mask,'" said Pennington.

Nights are at their darkest, Delucchi said, when a patient passes away.

Advanced age and pre-existing conditions make patients vulnerable to succumbing to COVID-19. When patients infected with the novel coronavirus arrive at the hospital, she said, everyone on staff roots for them and they do everything in their power to help. It is traumatizing when they die, she said, and it never gets easier.

Delucchi said she strives to be a kind and empathetic nurse — someone who can take care of patients and ease their worries. She got into her dream nursing school at CSU Long Beach this month and plans to start there next semester.

Her time in the COVID-19 ward has already shaped her outlook, she said.

"This experience makes me want to be a nurse even more, so that I am able to help people even than I am now."