

COVID ANGEL

A courageous young nurse volunteered for action in a deadly COVID-19 ward

BY ANA PAOLA OLVERA | Staff Writer

In February, 23-year-old SC nursing student Ariana 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 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

NURSE PG 5

Ariana 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.

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

Ariana Delucchi
SC NURSING MAJOR

Photo Courtesy
Valerie Pennington



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

Valerie Pennington
SC BIOLOGY PROFESSOR

SC student battles a pandemic in an overwhelmed COVID ward

Ariana Delucchi
logged more than 2,000 hours at the Sharp Memorial Hospital COVID ward in Chula Vista.

"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."

Ariana Delucchi
SC NURSING MAJOR



Student paper named one of century's best 100 publications

EDITING BY NICOLETTE MONIQUE LUNA

Julia Woock was very happy when she learned she had been selected as Editor-in-Chief of the Southwestern College Sun in June 2020.

Then a pause.

"So, how are we going to do this?" she asked.

Woock became part of the solution that required creativity, perseverance and patience. Locked out of the journalism lab and all its technology, student leaders had to make profound adjustments, she said. Working over Zoom, email, the phone and several versions of experimental software, she and her team published print newspapers while most colleges and universities settled for online publications.

"Last year we accomplished something that had never been done," she said. "Our curriculum went completely online and we still managed to inform and serve our community."

Woock joined 2020 El Sol Magazine EIC Pernisha Gaines as successful journalism cyber warriors. Gaines and her staff were less than halfway through their ambitious, but embryonic magazine when coronavirus stopped the presses. Her team scattered to at least 12 cities in three countries. Some were never heard from again.

Most, though, kept after it. With the help of one computer taken home from the shuttered journalism lab and the talent of former SC graphic arts instructor Ken Pagano, Gaines and Company cobbled together what many American journalism educators have called a masterpiece.

El Sol Magazine, Volume X, published in July 2020, two months after the end of the semester, is the USA's reigning National College Magazine of the Year.

The Sun enjoyed similar success under Woock, winning six national championships, as well as the Western Publishing Association's award as America's Best Student Publication. Another of the three finalist for the award was El Sol Magazine.



STUDENT PRESS PRESSES AHEAD – Student of Distinction Award recipient Brittany Cruz-Fejeran was Editor-in-Chief of *The Sun* when Southwestern College closed the campus in March 2020. Against all odds, Cruz-Fejeran held her staff together and finished an award-winning year. **Photo by Ernesto Rivera**

"I thought Pernisha and the El Sol would get it," said Woock. "It doesn't matter, really, because it was a lot of the same students who worked on both publications."

Gaines and Woock both credit an EIC they served under for generating the "Never give up!" spirit that drove their publications. Brittany Cruz-Fejeran, the 2019-20 leader of *The Sun*, had the proverbial rug pulled out from under her by coronavirus. Overnight Cruz-Fejeran went from the successful leader of a staff of 45 in a well-equipped college newsroom to a lonely EIC exiled to Paradise Hills with her laptop on the kitchen table. Woock was her News Editor.

"That was rough," she said. "Poor Brittany did not know what to do at first, but she figured it out. She refused to quit. She inspired the rest of us to push on."

Cruz-Fejeran, Woock and Gaines are part of a line of Southwestern College student journalists who will be honored this month at the Associated Collegiate Press National



JULIA WOOCK

College Media Convention. The Sun and El Sol are both finalists for the ACP's Pacemaker Award, the collegiate Pulitzer Prize. Woock is also one of three finalists for 2021 National College Reporter of the Year, an award she won in 2020. Originally scheduled for New Orleans, the convention was moved to a virtual event recently following Hurricane Ida and Louisiana's COVID-19 situation.

One recognition the three editors know *The Sun* will receive this weekend is a special Pacemaker Award honoring America's Best



PERNISHA GAINES

100 Student Publications of the Century. The Sun is also under consideration as one of the Best 10 Student Publications of the Century. Southwestern College never earned a Pacemaker Award until 2003, but now has 17.

To be recognized in such a manner while entering a 19th month in exile is surreal, said Woock.

"We aimed to do our best with whatever resources we had and lead with compassion through trying time," she said. "It was one of the most difficult things I had ever done, but also the most rewarding."

Southwestern College Sun and El Sol Magazine 2020-21 National Champions

Southwestern College Sun

- America's Best Student Publication (Western Publishing Association, Los Angeles)
- Pacemaker Award, the collegiate Pulitzer Prize (Associated Collegiate Press, Minneapolis)
- Best of Show (Associated Collegiate Press, Minneapolis)
- Most Outstanding College Newspaper (American Scholastic Press Association, NY)
- Most Outstanding Two-Year College Newspaper (Society of Professional Journalists, IN)
- Best Two-Year Collegiate Newspaper (College Media Association, NY)
- Best Community College Newspaper (California College News Media Association, Sacramento)
- Best Two-Year College Newspaper (California Newspaper Publishers Association, Sacramento)
- Best College Newspaper in San Diego County (San Diego Press Club)
- Best Collegiate Publication, San Diego County (San Diego Chapter SPJ)

Southwestern College El Sol Magazine

- Most Outstanding Community College Magazine (American Scholastic Press Association, NY)
- Best of Show (Associated Collegiate Press, Minneapolis)
- Best Community College Magazine (College Media Association, NY)
- Best College Magazine (California College News Media Association, Sacramento)

CONTINUED FROM PG. 4

NURSE: SC student volunteers to serve overwhelmed Chula Vista COVID ward

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 600,000 Americans. 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 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 though her feed unleashes a depressing stream 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 more than I am now."