

Working for the COVID-19 Sanitation Department

It still amazes me how quickly everything changed. One day I didn't believe that the pandemic was something we needed to worry about and then the next day we were told not to return to classes after spring break. The whole experience seemed surreal. I remember reading about the World Wars in history classes throughout middle school and high school and how families had to change their day to day lives to support these war efforts. At the time, I felt like a fly on a wall where I can safely look into these experiences. Obviously, I am not trying to compare this pandemic to any of these wars but, in a way, it feels like what I imagined it would feel like. There is this subtle sense of fear that you feel when you are out in public around a lot of people or, in my case, when you are working in a hospital. Every day at work I pass by this room that has a poem on the door. The poem reads:

Ye Ole Alarm Clock

*For forty-some years my life has been run
by the sound of that alarm.
I've gotten up on cold winter mornings
When the bed had felt so warm.
It's woke me up in the middle of a dream
of kissing Brigitte Bardot.
Or camping out with my grandkids
Or floating the mighty "Mo".
Then came a very important day.
I set it and pulled out the knob.*

*And that darn thing forgets to go off
And I darn near lost my job.
Then comes the day that I retire
But the darn thing went off at three.
I reached in my drawer and pulled out my gun
and shot a hole in the Son of a "B".*

To add a little emphasis to this poem, he placed the alarm clock on his door next to the poem, and there it was the bullet hole. This poem always warms my heart. In a way, it is telling a story about how a man found happiness and gained his freedom from his responsibilities. This poem does not tell his entire story though. Instead of being at the hand of his alarm clock, he is at the hand of this pandemic.

I work in an assisted living home where I sanitize high touch zones daily. Doing this is an attempt to avoid spreading germs of the virus if they manage to get into the hospital in Great Falls, Montana. Every day I feel bad for the residents who live there. Not only have they been stuck in the same building for the past six or seven weeks, but they have been stuck in their rooms. They are not allowed to walk in the halls if any other residents are out. At most, you might see two residents out of their room. This is only for the people who need basic needs such as cooking and cleaning. The residents that need help eating and walking are never allowed out of their rooms. They often get chased by the CNA's and scolded for leaving. In all honesty, they often need to be reminded about the importance of staying in their rooms. Anyone can easily tell that all of this is driving these residents crazy.

April 3rd was my first day of working for the COVID-19 Sanitation team. I was one of the more lucky people because the assistant living home was already in lockdown for three weeks before I started. Realistically the possibility of there being germs in the building was nearly impossible. I remember looking in a mirror that day. Looking in the mirror at my reflection was surreal for me. I looked like my mom while wearing these scrubs. People tell me about our appearances all the time but it hit me like a wall that day. I remember my mom wearing scrubs all of the time when she worked for a dermatologist. She always had her hair pulled up in a tight knot and did not wear any makeup or anything. That is what I am seeing in the mirror now.

My hair was pulled up in a tight knot similar to hers, but my hair gave off a purple sheen from an old dye job instead of her natural gold sheen. My uniform consisted of a grey top and black pants which were the scrub combination of a housekeeper or custodian. That's how the hospital organized their workers, by the color of their scrubs. Black is for doctors, olive Green is for CNAs, and navy blue is for registered nurses, just like my sister.

Weeks ago I was worried about being unemployed during this pandemic but now I am worried about catching the virus myself. Our local hospital opened up jobs for the community during the pandemic and I managed to get hired for one of the sanitation teams. That morning I felt sick to my stomach and I barely ate anything. I was extremely nervous about what my job was going to look like and what I would be exposed to.

When I walked in for my first day, my supervisor immediately handed me my new badge and flooded me with information about the virus and the importance of my job. It was important to keep everything clean since this virus could be fatal to older women and men. He explained how I would not be allowed to work if I showed any symptoms of any sickness, including a

runny nose, and then proceeded to take my temperature: 98.6. Every day, every employee checks their temperature before entering a building.

The main reason that I was hired was to clean “high touch zones”. This includes doorknobs, handrails, and armrests of chairs, so anything that multiple people would touch consistently in a day. This may sound simple and somewhat useless but it takes me most of my day just to get one wing sanitized and it is extremely important to be consistent with sanitizing these areas. Also, it could be mentally hard as well. I often had a hard time not zoning out while doing this. One day, I am pretty sure I cleaned one hall twice because I may not have cleaned it before the second time. After I clean them in the morning, two other people are expected to clean them later in the day making a total of three times that these zones are cleaned.

Every now and again, I get a chance to talk to some of the residents. One day, I was dusting one of the “libraries”. Honestly, it is not really a library in my opinion. There are maybe 30 books, but I guess if you google the definition of a library all you need is a collection of books that are kept for people to use. Anyway, there happened to be two different residents in this library. It was Friday, April 10th specifically (my temperature was 97.8 that morning) which means that the staff serves wine/beer. I was surprised by this but maybe that is because none of my grandparents ever drank from what I knew of. The residents asked me to sit down with them and drink. My immediate response was “No” and that “I can’t drink at work” but another employee interrupted me to give me a juice box. So I sat down with the two women, with the juice dangling in my hand because I had my mask on. One of them drank wine, and the other drank beer.

We talked about typical things, like how I am attending college and pursuing writing. How I moved to Great Falls because I was probably going to lose my job and I wanted to jump

the gun in case I couldn't find another one. All of a sudden, the lady who was drinking the wine asked to see the photo on my badge. I thought that was odd at first but I handed it over anyway. The two residents looked over my photo and kept making comments about how long my hair was and how they thought my dimples were cute, kind of similar to how my aunts always did, then I understood. They have never actually seen me because, during the whole time that I have been working here, my hair has been pulled away from my face and I have worn a face mask every day. So they had no idea what I looked like until they saw my photo.

Unfortunately, that was one of the few times that seemed slightly enjoyable. One day, a completely different resident walked up to me to ask if she could sit outside. I have no authority to tell her what she can and can't do but I knew that doors and windows were not allowed to be open. When I told her that she still tried to leave. Eventually, someone else stepped in and called the manager to ask for permission. Of course, she said no and I thought that was that. A couple of days later I found out that she decided to go out anyway. By acting out, she made her situation worse for her because she was put into self-quarantine, meaning that she could not leave her room for two weeks. I felt bad but she also needed to learn how serious all of this is.

The Monday after all of this happened, I found out that my boss was put into self-quarantine as well. Apparently he left the county to drop off a family member at their home and that caused him to be put into quarantine. Due to this, my job became a lot harder since he wasn't at work. During those two weeks, a lot of the housekeepers tried to take advantage of me. They would often walk up and order me to do some of their chores. Honestly, I would have been willing to help them if I could, but I was not trained on how to do their job on top of mine. I wasn't even allowed to go into the resident's rooms, so of course, I had to tell them no. It was weird to see this shift in this workplace because it all happened quickly. Everyday someone

would tell me to do some of their chores and some days, multiple people approached me. Telling so many people “no” caused a weird tension between everyone. It got to the point where I would try and finish my chores within a couple of hours and go home instead of staying for my full shift.

Unfortunately working in this environment wasn't the worse thing I had to deal with. There was a moment where I overheard a conversation between two residents while cleaning. I'm not really one of those people that eavesdrop but one woman said something that caught me off guard which was “I hope I do not die before I can see my family again.” I didn't really know what to do so I honestly just walked away, because at the time I thought it was reasonable to have those thoughts. Unfortunately, she passed away the weekend after she said that. No one tells you about all of the small things that you will face because of the uncertainty of it. I never thought I would experience something like this when I accepted a job to clean doorknobs.

Even after my boss came back, it was always tense at work. Of course, I told him about all of this and we agreed to cut my shifts in half because of how uncomfortable I was. Apparently, a couple of people tried to tell my boss that I didn't do the work that I was supposed to and thankfully he defended me. I am sure that they thought I was spoiled because of this. Later in the week, I would walk into different conversations where people were talking poorly about me. My favorite part was when they would try to act sweet after I caught them. I think it is all funny because my boss praised all of the employees and told me that this would probably be the best place that I ever worked since there were so many nice people, but all of that is fake. In fact, there are a lot of things that were fake. I remember thinking this on my first day. I would walk by plants and then realize that they were made of plastic. There were always these old-fashioned

pieces of furniture everywhere that you could only find at your grandparents' houses, but when you opened them, there would be work stations or hygiene supplies in them.

It is May 5th and today was the first time that I heard that restrictions may be lifted soon. Everyone was cheerful and had smiles on their face which seemed rare these days. I kind of ignored it at first and went on about my day. Then I realized why everyone was happy. I finished my chores and was gathering my stuff until I noticed a crowd outside. There were also a lot of cars in a line. Originally I thought that I would have to report it but then I noticed a kid pop out of the sunroof of one of the cars. The hospital allowed an outside session for the residents to see their family somewhat close. Their families were able to drive by and stop to talk to their grandparents from their car. I sat on a window seal and watched the whole thing. Today was the first day that seemed hopeful. Maybe everyone was finding a way to cope with our new lifestyles or maybe everything was changing for the better.

The future is still uncertain. We don't know if there is going to be another spike of patients after our stay at home orders are released or if everything is going to go back to normal soon. Despite this, I can give my insight into how I think this virus will shape our lives. During this quarantine, we have seen less pollution and more animals coming closer to the cities. I honestly believe that this will give us a chance to make better choices and keep taking care of our environment because we have seen big changes so far. Also, I believe that the entire nation will take sanitation more seriously from now on. We saw a variety of cities make efforts to sanitize places that are hardly cleaned as they should be. Overall, I hope that our experiences through this quarantine encourage people to continue these good habits. I don't know when all of this will be over or how much longer I will be working at the hospital. Maybe I will be here long enough to meet the man with the poem on his door. Or maybe long enough to have a couple more "wine

sessions” with the two older women. Hopefully, a vaccine for this virus will be created soon so that everyone can enjoy their life with a new perspective.