

# Coronavirus on the frontlines: A Williamsburg nurse's experience in NYC

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Katherine "Katy" Dean worked at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City during the coronavirus pandemic. (WYDaily/ Courtesy of Katy Dean)

After Katherine “Katy” Dean was furloughed in March and could not find a job in her field, she found herself applying for a position in New York City at the height of the coronavirus pandemic.

“There were a lot of CRNA (Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist) that were in the same kind of predicament I was in,” she said. “They were part-time people who weren’t working but also kind of felt called to do something.”

The Williamsburg mother of four previously worked as a nurse anesthetist for North American Partners in Anesthesia, or NAPA, part-time at Riverside Regional Medical Center in Newport News before she signed a month-long contract with LocumTenens to work at Mount Sinai Hospital in April.

In New York City, there were hospital bed shortages.

The Javitz Center had been transformed into a hospital, a tent hospital was set up in Central Park and the USNS Comfort, a hospital ship from Norfolk, was docked in the city take care of non-coronavirus patients, eventually also treated COVID-19 patients.

She said hundreds of nurses came to help at Mount Sinai because the hospital was reopening floors which had been closed prior to the pandemic and nurses were taking care of more than two patients at a time because there wasn’t enough staff.

“So when I first arrived, it was very chaotic,” Dean said. “Imagine 300 people starting all at the same day with limited orientation to the facility and getting them scheduled so that the staffing was equally dispersed,” she said. “Not an easy feat.”

In her first day at Mount Sinai, the hospital staff wasn’t sure where to put Dean because they did not know what her skill set was. So they sent her to a “pod” to help nurses take care of eight patients, seven of whom were on ventilators with IV drips to keep their blood pressure stable.

She worked with another anesthetist to intubate patients not on a ventilator and helped care for other patients in whatever way she could. She went around the hospital the next day with a general surgeon putting the central IV lines in patients.

“We did about 16 patients in a 12-hour shift that all needed all those kind of lines, the arterial and the central lines,” Dean said. “So normally, when we’re not in COVID-19, it takes maybe about 15-20 minutes to gather all the supplies, go in the room, prep the room in a sterile fashion and use the ultra sound machines...in COVID-19 times, you have to search the hospital for the equipment.”

The staff also had to wear personal protective equipment and wear another gown before heading into the patient’s room.

It took them 45 minutes to get ready for each patient, she said.

“Then you have to take all your apparel off, then clean the equipment before you take it in to the next patient,” she said.

Dean said she was happy with the amount of rationed PPE — she received N95 masks at the beginning of each shift. She was also impressed with the level of care given to patients. As time went on, the equipment became easier to find and was placed in a central location.

She was hired as a nurse anesthetist to put central IVs in patients' necks but ended up training about 40 nurses in critical care, helping them with IV drips and managing ventilators. As a nurse anesthetist, working with ventilators was nothing new to Dean. She helped out as needed, passing medications, doing breathing treatments.

Dean averaged about 60 hours a week and worked exclusively with COVID-19 patients.

“We've been told that it's old, sick people that are really at risk and that's not what I saw,” Dean said. “I saw a 36-year-old healthy female pediatrician, and a 39-year-old with no pre-existing conditions, really sick and debilitated from the virus.”

The pediatrician was at Mount Sinai for two days before she was transferred to another facility and while Dean is not completely sure what the outcome was, she knew it “wasn't good.”

The 39-year-old ended up growing clots in his kidneys and Dean said he would probably have to be on dialysis for the rest of his life.

“I consider myself very healthy, I don't have any underlying health issues but seeing her made me feel vulnerable,” Dean said.

She coped with her job by talking to her family via FaceTime every day, even if it was just for five minutes, before she went to bed. She also rode her bike to the hospital, Central Park and around the deserted, city neighborhoods.

She also used a meditation app called Headspace, which was offered to health care workers for free, and listened to it every night before she went to sleep.

When Dean returned to Williamsburg, she quarantined herself in an RV (thanks to the group RVs 4 MDs) away from her husband, a civil engineer at Draper Aidan Associates, and her four children.

Even though her COVID-19 test came back negative, she still quarantined herself as a precaution since tests had been known to give false negatives.

“I put my life on the line for other people that was my choice, I understand that,” she said. “When I’m out and about in Williamsburg and I see people wearing masks, it makes me feel like [what] I went to do wasn’t in vain and it wasn’t wasted.”

“I don’t need free shoes, I don’t need free food, I need people to communicate openly and to try and find [a] solution and I think most health care workers would agree with that.”

She hopes her story gives others an honest and unbiased perspective because the news and everything else seems to offer conflicting views.

“I’m worried that people are caught up in the politics of it all and I realize that New York is a whole different animal than Williamsburg or even Newport News as far as per capita, but I do think that people need to come together and think about not only of themselves and their immediate family but also of their community when making decisions about reopening,” she said. “I would hate for what I saw in New York to be something that I see here because it’s very sad.”

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