Script – Print – One Day at a Time
First-Year Nurses Reflect on Caring for COVID Patients

Brianna Thounsavath first considered a nursing career when she helped care for family members who had suffered some serious health issues. That's when she developed a passion for caring for others, nursing them back to good health and becoming an advocate in their time of need.

Vanessa Moya has a similar story. Following high school, Moya began exploring different career paths looking for an opportunity to help people – a job that would be hands on, where she could make a real impact on others.

Thounsavath and Moya both graduated from the Saint Anthony College of Nursing in December of 2019. A few months later, the new registered nurses accepted positions on the Neuro Telemetry unit at OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center in Rockford.

They were thrilled to get their careers started. There was a four-week orientation – learning their new unit and meeting their new colleagues. If that wasn't enough, they also had to kick start their careers during a global pandemic, as the COVID-19 virus emerged at the same time as the young nurses were simply trying to get their bearings.

"I just tried to take one day at a time," says Moya. "It was definitely helpful that the staff was supportive. It was challenging, but it was a good work environment. Everyone was supportive and they were trying to learn, too, as they go."

Nurses – both new and experienced – turned to one another to navigate the unchartered waters of a pandemic. They offered each other moral support; a shoulder to lean on, or someone who would simply listen.

"Definitely a lot of people have had a good cry," says Moya. "We're lucky that we're very team oriented on our unit. We have definitely supported each other in that we've all been in the same boat, so we can all relate."

"I really love my coworkers so that gets me through a lot, too," says Thounsavath. "If I ever need help I can go to them and no one would hesitate to help me, so that's a really big plus. I'm really happy where I am."

Caring for the sickest of patients is difficult for veteran nurses, let alone for someone who's been on the job for less than two months. The situations these nurses experienced weren't found in textbooks.

"There were definitely some overwhelming days," says Moya. "It was challenging at times, but I just tried to take my time and take it day by day and I tried to take time for myself when I wasn't at work to self-care and things like that."

To cope with the stress, the long hours, and the dire situations that some of their patients faced, many nurses turn to self-care. It might be a long walk, a good book or a long drive that helps medical professionals unwind after a long day to prepare for the next challenging shift.

"I make sure I have time to myself when I'm not working," says Thounsavath. "So if I'm working a couple of days in a row, I want to make sure when I go home I can sit on the couch and relax. Or I like to hang out with my friends and family. I like that I'm able to do everything that I want to do outside of work and not worry about not having to do something. That helps me a lot."

Nearly 1 ½ years into caring for COVID patients, nurses are still dealing with the impact felt by the deadly virus. Both Moya and Thounsavath say the experience has toughened them and made them better nurses as a result.

"It's definitely made me stronger," says Moya. "There have been times when I questioned whether this is the right fit for me, but it's definitely satisfying once you see all the things I've learned and all the things we can do. It's been rewarding."