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Working Through a Pandemic as a Teen in a Nursing Home

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Working Through a Pandemic, as a Teen in a Nursing Home

St. John Fisher College

ENGL 1010-2

Dr. Critchlow

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Working Through a Pandemic, as a Teen in a Nursing Home

I am a seventeen-year-old girl, who spent my time during the COVID-19 pandemic working full time in a nursing home. I had been working at this nursing home as an Elder Care Associate for two years prior to the pandemic but working during this time was extremely difficult. I had my nose assaulted with a swab that felt like it was being pushed to the back of my brain multiple times a week. I was sweating in gowns, gloves, N95 masks, and face shields. At one point, nurses were wearing rain ponchos as gowns because that was all that was available. I was watching the residents' health go downhill as they were becoming depressed from the lack of contact with loved ones or even smiles from the now-masked caregivers. Fortunately, no residents contracted the disease, but they were still affected greatly by the pandemic. All the inconvenient precautions I was following were to keep the residents safe. The residents faced a lot of emotional trauma. They were also swabbed for COVID, most not even understanding what was happening. They were unable to see their loved ones, which led to some not knowing who their family members were when visitation started up. Dementia did not pause for the pandemic. There are many things that I did as a nursing home employee during this time that I did not like doing, but I had to do them for the greater good. There were also many things that the residents went through that I wish they did not have to.

I was working in the same hot, wet N95 mask that I had been wearing for weeks. It left imprints on my face and made my skin breakout. Seven hours out of my eight-hour shift would be spent on the floor where N95 masks are mandatory. I also had to wear face shields at one point over my N95. This made me even hotter. It also muffled the sound, so the residents who already were hard of hearing, could not hear me. One day, I walked into a resident's room and

she was sleeping in bed with a surgical mask over her mouth and nose and gloves on. I woke her up and asked her what she was doing. She did not understand the circumstances of the virus and she was worried. I had to explain to her that us employees are safe because we are tested and that we wear masks just to protect them. Eventually she understood me and felt more comfortable. She took off her mask and gloves. The next day I went back to her room and she had masks and gloves on again. She feared the virus again because she forgot the conversation, we had the day before. She dreaded the virus and could not remember she was safe. I hate that these were the circumstances. It was okay when I was worried and had to follow procedures but when it came to the point where residents were worried, it was unsettling.

Working during this time of COVID, I had a lot of extra tasks to do. I had to take the temperatures of every resident in the building twice a day, I had to feed residents because we were short staffed, and I did a lot of video chatting with families. Video chatting with families was at times heartbreaking. Imagine having a close family member in a nursing home and not be able to see them for months. I helped one resident video chat with her sister. Prior to Corona her sister would visit many nights a week to have coffee and play cards. When I helped her video chat, she said, "Who's that?" and giggled. My heart broke at that moment. She did not remember her own sister. Eventually, I think she realized who it was, but this happened to many other residents as well. There is also a technology barrier here. These residents do not know what FaceTime is. Another lady rubbed the face of her daughter on the tablet. She knew she was there but did not understand how. It did not matter, she was happy.

Until recently, the only visits allowed were at the last 24 hours of life. Nursing staff had to predict that to the best of their experience. Then, we got the approval from the state to hold

outdoor, socially distant visits. One family member could come and visit their resident outside sitting at opposite ends of a six-foot table, with masks on. This may sound like a good idea, but many residents do not recognize their visitors even without masks on! With masks on, they are confused, they cannot hear from that distance, and some cannot see from that distance. It was good for family members to be able to see their loved ones, but they cannot even hold their hands.

I am thankful that I decided to stay on as an employee despite the strict regulations and heartbreaking impact on residents and families. I know I provided companionship when there was no one else to do so. I enjoyed spending free time talking, holding, and becoming family with the residents. I delivered their mail and helped them open gifts from their loved ones.

I experienced both joy and grief of seeing family members come to the bedside for a visit knowing that it will be the last time seeing them as it is the end of their life and the resident was facing imminent death. I experienced that firsthand as I watched my grandfather look in my grandma's window from July to August until last week, when he was allowed in for one bedside visit as my grandmother reached the end of her life. I now know what it feels like as a caregiver and as a family member to accept rules and move forward.

I know I cannot change these rules because policy comes from New York State; however, I did not agree with all of them. I had no problem wearing PPE to protect others and although it was not comfortable, I did not mind having a nasal swab shoved to my brain two times a week. But I did not like how this was affecting the residents. Some residents were terrified. They were having swabs shoved up their noses, they were not able to see their families, their mental health was going downhill. I did not even care that I was consistently stressed, because I knew what I

was doing was making a difference. In times of conflict, sometimes it is important to press through and then step back and reanalyze the situation. I was not able to influence or change the state mandates, but now taking a step back and thinking about the situation, a lot of positive things came out of it for me and the people they were intended to protect. I was forced into my future field of work by feeding, documenting, and taking vitals. I am more confident than before, I want to be a Nurse Practitioner in the future, and I want to specialize in the Geriatric community. I was put way out of my comfort zone comforting my superiors, talking to adults over the phone, staying strong in an uncertain time, and working adult hours. In this case, the resolution to conflict was to learn when to speak up and when arguing would be futile. I did learn that growth and positive outcomes can come from conflict.