

## Stronger by the Day

### COVID-19 Survivor Spends 30 Days in Fort Sanders Regional ICU

At the beginning of 2020, Sandra Savage couldn't have predicted the whirlwind she was about to experience. The Union County resident works as a dialysis nurse in Knox County, aiding patients with renal replacement therapy. As the COVID-19 pandemic progressed, despite her best efforts she contracted COVID-19 in July. Suddenly roles were reversed, and the nurse became the patient.

Her symptoms started with a headache, muscle aches and a low-grade fever. Within a few days Savage had shortness of breath and trouble breathing, and sought care at Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center's emergency room. She was admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU), and spent more than 30 days there battling the virus.

#### Patient Says, "I Got Hit Hard"

Savage was in the ICU

for so long because she needed additional oxygen to breathe. She also had developed pneumonia as a result of the virus.

"She was on a BiPAP machine, which helps push air in and out of the lungs, for several weeks," said Corey Cudzilo, MD, Savage's physician and a pulmonologist at Fort Sanders Regional. "She responded to treatment and eventually was able to transfer from the intensive care unit to an inpatient room once her condition improved and she no longer required COVID isolation."

Dr. Cudzilo says that treating COVID-19 patients is "unlike any patient care experience that I've had. Even for those who recover, there can be lingering effects. It's hard to see our patients, knowing how isolated they are feeling."

"It made a big difference



Sandra Savage spent more than 30 days in the Fort Sanders Regional ICU battling COVID-19. Now, she's back home regaining her strength day-by-day.

when Ms. Savage moved from ICU to inpatient because her husband could come visit her," he continued. "She has medical knowledge because of her profession, which made her familiar with some aspects of her illness. She was weak

when she went home and still easily winded, but had resources to get oxygen and physical therapy, and had a lot of family support."

#### Support at Home

Savage lives with her husband and high school-aged son, and her parents live close by. She is thankful for her family and her community's support, knowing many were praying for her. She is especially grateful for her husband, who has not left her side. "The support of my family is everything," she says. "I don't know where I would be."

Savage adds, "You don't know how weak you are until you can't get up by yourself. It took a lot to get me set up with my oxygen at home. My husband helps me with everything; we have a routine now."

Savage is on continuous oxygen therapy and prac-

tices her physical therapy exercises twice per day. She practices lifting her arms, lifting her legs and doing small movements that built up her stamina. She can now move around the house, but if she exerts herself, she has to sit and take a break, and use oxygen.

"It's nothing you can imagine," she says. "I changed so drastically in a week. I went from getting up at 3:30 a.m. to go to work, and one week later, I couldn't breathe."

#### Excellent Care When Needed Most

Savage appreciates the excellent care she received at Fort Sanders Regional. She says her nurses and doctors were also navigating uncharted waters, donning extensive PPE every time they entered her room.

Being in a hospital ICU with visitor restrictions left her feeling lonely and iso-

lated. Savage says the care team took care of her medical needs, but also checked in on her emotionally when they could.

She recalls one ICU nurse who paused to kneel beside Savage's bed and take deep breaths alongside her. She remembers moments when it was hard to breathe, so Savage says having someone hold her hand through those uncertain times was meaningful and still brings tears to her eyes.

"Dr. Cudzilo was great and the nurses in the ICU and on the fifth floor all took great care of me. And I know they don't hear it enough - I am so thankful for everything they did for me."

To learn more about the COVID-19 virus, visit [CovenantHealth.com/Coronavirus](http://CovenantHealth.com/Coronavirus). For information about symptoms, testing, and the COVID-19 vaccine, visit [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus).

## Hope for Tomorrow

Corey Cudzilo, MD, pulmonologist at Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center, reminds the community that the COVID-19 virus can affect anyone. While preexisting conditions are a factor in how sick you may become, they are not always clear indicators.

"It's important that we all do everything we can, and keep doing what we have been doing," he says. "We are all susceptible to 'fear fatigue' and 'isolation fatigue.' I would encourage people to hang in there, because with the vaccine we see the light at the end of the tunnel.

"[The nurses] are doing the heavy lifting with patient interaction," he adds. "Their job is demanding and sometimes thankless. In many cases, patients' successful outcomes are a result of good ICU care."

#### A Note from Your ICU Nurse

Krista Henley is one of the critical care nurses at Fort Sanders Regional who cared for Sandra Savage.

"I remember when she went home after a long

hospitalization," Henley recalls. "Each day, she got a little better. COVID-19 will infect the people you don't necessarily suspect; people of any age and gender can be affected."

Henley recalls the victorious moment when she got to help Savage into her

vehicle to head home after a long, isolated stay. It was a celebration for everyone. The staff who cared for her even lined the hallways to cheer for Savage as she left for home.

As a frontline healthcare worker treating COVID-19 patients every day, Henley

says, "You want to be with your patients as much as you can and to take care of them. It's tiring but rewarding." Her message is simple: "It's so important to keep wearing a mask, washing your hands, and doing what you can" to prevent the spread of the virus.



## Five Steps to a Safer Community

Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center encourages following the five core actions recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to help prevent the spread of COVID-19:

- 1 Practice physical distancing
- 2 Wear a cloth face covering in public places
- 3 Wash hands properly and often
- 4 Clean surfaces regularly
- 5 Stay home when sick or when told to quarantine/isolate

For more information about Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center, visit [FSRegional.com](http://FSRegional.com).



# COMING SOON!

Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center's new and expanded **Critical Care Department** will open this spring, continuing our tradition of providing excellent care to our community.

