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Diary of a COVID-19 crisis nurse in NYC: A student's first job

May 8, 2020



On May 1, Tucker Westbrook could finally sleep in. He'd been on duty as a COVID-19 crisis nurse at Harlem Hospital Center in New York City for 11 consecutive days, with a routine that began before the sun came up and ended long after the city had gone dark.

Most mornings, he'd wake at 5:45 am., center himself with prayer and meditation, eat breakfast, and hop on a bus in time to clock in for his shift at the largest public hospital in Central Harlem by 7 a.m.

Each day as he entered the halls of the facility's surgical floor, which was transformed into a COVID-19 holding unit for the larger part of his three-week work rotation, he was unsure of what he'd encounter.

Just weeks earlier, Westbrook, a May 2019 Georgia Southern University nursing graduate from Butler, Georgia, accepted a short-term contract to assist with the Coronavirus pandemic in the epicenter of the U.S. outbreak.

This was Westbrook's first professional job, following what was supposed to be a yearlong mission trip in Southeast Asia, but was cut short due to the pandemic, and nothing could fully prepare him for the impact of his initial experience.

"The first day, I thought, 'I'm not prepared for this,'" he admitted. "Those first few days I was on pins and needles and thought, 'how am I going to mess up?'"

The stakes were high. By the time he arrived in New York City, thousands had already been hospitalized, and many had died. Seasoned nurses and doctors were depleted and morale was low across the city, he explained on the phone as he looked out over a desolate Times Square from his hotel window.

"They asked me, 'why did you come here?'" Westbrook recalled. "And I said that I wanted to be, hopefully, a light in this dark place right now. The patients, the doctors, the nurses, the nursing assistants, the janitorial assistants — my goal is to learn everyone's names and greet them with a smile behind my mask."

A friend encouraged Westbrook to look for a temporary nursing job upon his return from abroad. When he applied for highly competitive positions with a crisis staffing agency, he requested placement in an area hard hit by the pandemic.

“Just like Southeast Asia, I wanted to go where there was the biggest need, and I had enough gifts to meet that need,” Westbrook said.

This was Westbrook’s first trip to New York, and he stepped into a scene where images of makeshift morgues and ventilator shortages splashed across the media came to life in front of him.

“It has been surreal to see,” he said.

Assigned to provide cluster care to potential COVID-19-positive patients for minimal exposure, Westbrook also focused on simple acts of kindness to help ease increased anxiety among the patients.

“That might be things as small as giving a wet rag to wipe their face,” Westbrook said. “It may be filling their jars with ice cold water in the morning. Whatever might help them feel more comfortable.”

Westbrook’s patients were diverse: a teenage gunshot victim who sobbed at the prospect of being infected with the virus; an adult male who discussed intimate thoughts about death with his family over the phone; and a woman who was depressed until Westbrook sat with her so she didn’t feel alone.

Experiencing humanity in its most delicate form was life-defining.

“I was learning more about nursing care but also continuing to serve (my patients) beyond simply giving them medicine,” Westbrook said. “I was able to advocate for them with the doctor, especially without their families there. I’m learning how to go above and beyond, and what our job responsibilities are. I want to keep growing and learning to continue to give care to my patients.”

The hospital staff also offered enormous support and guidance to Westbrook, who almost two weeks into the job felt exponentially more confident in his abilities.

“If you had told me about any of this I wouldn’t believe it,” he said. “It has been incredible. I did not think I could do that at all, and here I am on the other side. This was such a lofty and high goal to complete this and do well. I’m thankful to even be here and have this opportunity.”

Westbrook credits his father for encouraging him to study nursing, and Georgia Southern faculty for their expert instruction, which he put to use in New York, as well as their sage advice.

“I wasn’t sure I was going to get my license,” he said. “My desire to become a doctor or a missionary became more and more compelling, but my professors assured me that it would be worthwhile to pursue my license, and they were right.”

Following a quarantine in his family’s home, Westbrook will begin pre-medicine classes at Georgia Southern this summer.

Westbrook joins several other Georgia Southern School of Nursing alumni on the front lines in New York:

Jeanette Leggett – Armstrong State University (‘10)

Dierdre Taylor – Armstrong State University (‘11)

Elizabeth Landrum – Armstrong State University (‘14)

Kaliya Alfred – Georgia Southern University – Armstrong campus (‘18)

Jessica Journeycake – Georgia Southern University – Armstrong campus (‘18)

Katerina Reyzin – Georgia Southern University – Armstrong campus ('18)

Caroline Yost – Georgia Southern University – Statesboro campus ('19)



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Georgia Southern Eagle Battalion Commander to continue soaring after graduation

May 8, 2020



Mattie Cantrall said climbing a volcano in Africa is just one of several experiences she's had during her time at Georgia Southern that has prepared her for a career in the Army.

Mattie Cantrall has been soaring over obstacles for the past four years at Georgia Southern, but after graduating this spring with a Bachelor of Business Administration in Logistics, the Eagle Battalion Commander will take to the air again. This time in U.S. Army Air Assault School in Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

Graduation for Cantrall also means she will assume the second lieutenant rank and start her commission as an officer in the U.S. Army Transportation Corps. She'll undergo 16 weeks of training in Virginia before she heads to Fort Campbell, where she will become a cargo specialist and support combat arms as a member of the brigade support battalion.

Cantrall, whose major was logistics and intermodal transportation with a minor in military science, said her academic experience, as well as her time with ROTC, have prepared her for the next step in her career.

"The Parker College of Business academic program has pushed me further than I thought I could be pushed academically," she said. "I have learned how to compartmentalize information and comprehend, not just memorize and brain dump following an exam. ROTC on the other hand has pushed me past my limits in every aspect possible: physically, mentally, emotionally and psychologically. I grew as a person."

Cantrall's experience at Georgia Southern went beyond the classroom and ROTC. As a cadet, she had the opportunity to travel the world, including a trip to Cabo Verde, Africa, where she hiked two volcanoes, rebuilt

a local school, trained with the military and swam in beautiful waters. She said these experiences will not only help her professionally, but also personally to motivate her throughout her career.



Cantrall poses with a child during her trip to Africa.

“The climb was brutal at some points with rocks slipping beneath our feet and our legs cramping up,” Cantrall said. “The view at the top was breathtaking, looking 10,000 feet down at the ocean beneath you. The most incredible part was going down. As I move forward in my career, I can tell people about the pain and the struggle of going up the mountain, or I can tell them about the beautiful view at the top and the enjoyment and weightlessness of going down.”

Cantrall has also made some wonderful memories in Statesboro. As a part of color guard, she carried the nation’s colors in Paulson Stadium before football games and represented the University during Georgia Southern Day at the Capitol in Atlanta.

The highest honor Cantrall received during her time as an Eagle, however, came in Kentucky at advanced camp, where she earned a Recondo Badge. Around 6,000 cadets go to the camp each year, where they must pass a series of tests to complete training. The tests include tactical combat casualty care, various firearm tests, land navigation, a timed 6-mile weighted run and the Army Physical

Fitness Test. Cantrall passed all her tests on the first try, while also hitting a higher standard on all of them. She is the first female cadet to earn Recondo since it was reinstated two years ago.

“This Recondo is for every female that did not think they could accomplish something,” Cantrall said. “I give all the credit to two groups of people: my platoon and all the females in my regiment. We studied together while sitting out in the middle of the woods, we paced each other on the 6-mile ruck march, and we extended a hand every time we started to feel beat down.”

With all of her accomplishments, Cantrall’s favorite memory at Georgia Southern may be surprising to some.

“My fondest memory was in the fall of 2019 when the ROTC intramural softball team won the championship game,” she said. “There was no greater pride than to see the entire sideline packed with fellow cadets cheering on their teammates and battling back and forth until the final bat. That energy and comradery gave the energy in Paulson a run for its money.”