

COVER
STORY

RED WOLVES RESPOND

ALUMNI FROM ACROSS THE NATION BATTLE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Known across the Delta as the leading university for nursing and health professions, Arkansas State University alumni fill the front line ranks of America's response to the coronavirus pandemic. Voices takes a look at five of those faces, and recaps for alumni the reaction of A-State to COVID-19.

Two recent graduates, Mandy Thomas '19 and Josh Godsey '19, did not wait for the virus. They volunteered to work in New York City at Mount Sinai Hospital during the peak of the pandemic in April. Godsey works for East Memphis Anesthesia Services while Thomas is with USAP in Sherman, Texas. The duo took on a 21-day assignment.

Their families and close friends had similar reactions to their decision.

"A combination of worried and incredibly proud at the same time," Godsey said. "The people at EMAS were very supportive and had a genuine concern for my safety, but they were also proud that I went."

"Most were in shock because I am a single mother of a seven-year-old and 22-year-old," Thomas said. "After they stepped back and looked at the big picture, they knew that it was a decision that was easy for me to make. This is why my daughter answers, 'my mom is a saver' when people ask her what I do. My son is in the Army and referred to it as a mom deployment."

Both agreed that arriving in New York City was a surreal experience, both exactly like and nothing close to what the rest of the country has watched on the nightly news.

"Never having been to NYC before, only seeing the city in movies and TV shows, it seemed like an apocalypse," Godsey said. "It's difficult to describe, but the fear and unease was palpable in the air. People were afraid to be near each other and even afraid of healthcare workers. The only people that were out were either medical professionals or military personnel from the recent military takeover of the hospitals."

"It was scary, sad, and devastating to walk into the hospital that I was assigned to," Thomas said. "You could see the sheer exhaustion on the faces of all the healthcare providers."

The work was relentless during their assignment. From assisting on the floors to working alongside teams in the intensive care units, Godsey and Thomas had little time to reflect as they performed a wide range of duties. The enormity of the task kept them moving forward, but not without moments of concern.

"Literally every patient, in every room, in every area of the hospital had COVID-19," Godsey said. "It made me nervous to finally be around positive patients and so many of them. Yet, that was quickly remedied by reminding myself what I was there for, so I dug deep and got to work."

"Here we are and there was only four to 10 patients in the entire hospital that did NOT have COVID-19," Thomas said. "Everyone had it and everyone was scared. I came from a sheltered place with only a few cases to hundreds in one hospital. It was an eye-opening experience to see the damage COVID-19 was doing."

Along with first-hand skills with a deadly virus, the experience provided both with hope.

"Human nature can be a beautiful thing," Godsey said. "Despite what you see on TV or read online, we are innately good. We want to help our fellow man. I have never experienced a greater coming together of people for a common cause."

"The people of New York City were so kind and thankful," Thomas said. "There was an outpouring of gratitude everywhere we went. It was a scary time. We knew that at any moment, we could be the next



person that caught COVID-19. But do not let fear sideline you in the COVID-19 fight. Human kindness should be shared each day by everyone."

Both returned to quarantine to make sure they did not bring home more than experience and memories from their time in NYC.

"I learned that, though I could not save every patient I cared for, I can make a difference," Thomas reflected. "It didn't matter to them that I had only been out of CRNA school less than a year. It mattered that I was brave enough to leave my family and friends to stand tall with them on the frontlines in the epicenter of this crisis."

Both said their employers were grateful for their willingness to volunteer and to bring back to their respective hometowns knowledge and skill that can only come from working in such a high-stress environment.

"I met so many people from different walks of life, all there to answer the call from NYC for help," Godsey remembered. "However sad, in its own way it was beautiful to witness such a gathering of incredibly intelligent, skilled, and compassionate people all in one place."

"I also learned ways to care for people who contracted the virus, as well as some new skills, new equipment, and approaches to patient management that I would not have received outside this crisis. I am a stronger and more capable provider for the experience and hope I can bring some of that knowledge home to potentially help people here."

Thomas had a special message for the current A-State students.

"I was sitting where you are one year ago," she said. "Push each day to achieve every goal you have and then find new goals after that. Do not think that you cannot help someone just because you are still a student."

And both credited the faculty of the College of Nursing and Health Professions as vital to their preparation.

"By far the most important thing that A-State offers is a safe and supportive learning environment," Godsey explained. "People learn the best when they feel safe and supported by their staff and professors. Ultimately, you're looking to get an education that you will carry with you for the rest of your life. I was given all the knowledge and skills needed to be a competent CRNA once I graduated. A-State made me the strong provider I am today, and I am very grateful for my education and time I spent there."

"Without my time in the A-State nurse anesthesia program, I would not

have been prepared or brave enough to answer the call for help during this crisis," Thomas said. "Each test, trial, tribulation, and accomplishment prepared me for those 21 days. Time management and critical thinking learned from my faculty and clinical preceptors gave me the strength for each task that I encountered."

Dr. David Smalley '73 already had a lifetime of service before 2020. A retired brigadier general with 30 years of decorated service in the U.S. Army with numerous active duty assignments and tours, he's honored by A-State as a member of the Red Wolves Battalion's Hall of Heroes. His academic career spans over 25 years, notably as a professor of pathology and a professor of clinical laboratory sciences at the University of Tennessee Health Sciences Center.

As he did in the Army, he has risen through the ranks to become president of the company now known as American Esoteric Laboratories (AEL) in Memphis. AEL had been in business for over 60 years as a full-service reference laboratory for more than 80 hospitals and thousands of clinics and physician practices across six states.

"Although our laboratory always ran 24 hours per day, the impact of receiving thousands of COVID-19 samples at a time has been a huge challenge," Smalley said. "We have maintained the turnaround times that help our hospitals and providers to respond to the new infections. Because of the COVID testing, AEL is now serving more than 150 hospitals in the Mid-South."

Scale and logistics quickly became the greatest challenges, something his three decades in the U.S. Army uniquely prepared him to tackle.

"For example, getting a critical specimen from a patient in remote sites to be tested in a timely fashion as various cities shut down, and the availability of supplies and support forced us to adjust," Smalley said. "The sheer volume of testing is overwhelming in providing thousands of results to providers in thousands of locations. The impact on healthcare systems was shocking and the requirement to be flexible in dealing with the changes during the spread is a great lesson. No matter how prepared, there will be new things that impact your plan."

While to the general public COVID-19 seems to be unprecedented, for long-time medical professionals like Smalley, it is the latest in a series of great challenges for which his career has prepared him to take on. He served as the director of the state of Tennessee's Department of Health Laboratory systems during the H1N1

outbreak, and credits his time at the Army War College and 30 years in the military as crucial to managing the current pandemic's challenges.

For Smalley, it all began in Jonesboro at A-State.

"My training in the medical laboratory has been a base for all the things that I have done in my professional life," he said. "The evolution of new technologies that I have seen and experienced are amazing. The core training and education at A-State allowed me to grow as I pursued additional education and training."

And if there is one thing Smalley would like to explain, just like CSI magic that solves crimes in less than an hour, television medical shows do not tell the true story of the complexity of medical testing.

"Testing is an important part of controlling this pandemic, and it can't be taken lightly," Smalley said. "TV portrays testing as simple and completed during the time of a commercial. The tests that are being done for COVID are complex, and in all of my professional career to think that I would see thousands of molecular tests run per day."

To capture the current scale, AEL first validated in early March to perform the first molecular testing for COVID-19, increasing to 2,500 tests per day by mid-March. By the end of March, AEL tested over 35,000 people and by mid-May topped 200,000 patients with no end in sight.

Dr. Sherlita Amler earned her Master's of Science in Nursing degree from Arkansas State University in 1979, before going on to earn her M.D. at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. Currently the commissioner of health at the Westchester County Department of Health in Rochester, N.Y., she has been interviewed extensively by national media outlets during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the March 15 installment of CBS Television's *60 Minutes*. She is also a faculty member at New York Medical College, where she serves as clinical associate professor of pediatrics, and adjunct professor of epidemiology and community health.

With New York being an early hot spot in the pandemic, Amler was asked if anyone could have anticipated the impact that COVID-19 would have on the country and the world.

Since early March, as the virus has spread across the globe, Amler said the approach to fighting the virus is much the same, but the scale of the fight against COVID-19 is much greater than the days of thinking that it could be contained to a few travelers and family members.

"In any emergency, the first casualty is information, and the current pandemic was no exception when it emerged from those early case counts," Amler stated. "The public health response, first, the CDC to state and local health departments, ramped up rapidly to gather critically needed information. How many cases, in what age groups, how mild or how severe, how (was it) transmitted, and how to treat or prevent the disease? Today, with some of that information available, we are combating a much more extensive epidemic that already has killed more than 100,000 Americans.

"Every member of my staff has become involved in the response to the outbreak, in addition to the many other vital functions of a full service public health department," Amler continued. "We are working long hours and weekends to identify those who are ill and need to be isolated, as well as those exposed who require quarantine. We are testing at-risk groups such as seniors in nursing homes, and advising families on ways to minimize risk and stay safe."

When asked what she hoped to look back on, and what she hopes will be better when the pandemic is over, Amler said that she hopes to see a completed textbook chapter on COVID-19, full of the detailed information we currently lack, a list of treatment options, and a safe and effective vaccine.

"Personally, I envision newly learned cooperative skills in fighting disease, and I pray for an extended A-State family that is healthy and prosperous," she added.



"No, I don't think so," she said. "When we first learned of this new virus, we knew almost nothing about it, only that a new strain of virus similar to flu and the common cold was spreading rapidly in China, and causing a surprising number of deaths. The first cases reported here in the U.S. were all travel-related and it looked like they might well be contained to just a few travelers and some of their household members. By early March, worldwide spread was occurring and we had our first official cases in New York."

Final advice from alumni:



Dr. David Smalley

We have a lot to learn but the testing and understanding of the spread, the protective efforts, and our

prevention in the future are critical. Listen to the medical professional. This virus has to be contained and we have to abide by the social distancing and face masks use. Wash your hands!



Josh Godsey

The belief that this disease is hoax or a conspiracy is a luxury. If you maintain that belief, I'm extremely

happy for you, for that means you have the luxury of being in an area that is not nearly as affected by COVID-19 as NYC. I assure you, you do not need to believe in the virus, but it surely believes in you.



Mandy Thomas

COVID-19 is the single most horrible virus that I have ever encountered inside a hospital. It is real

and it does not discriminate against age, gender, race, health status, economical status, location, religion, or political views. It is an opportunistic virus that will spread if given the opportunity.



Dr. Sherlita Amler

Facing a threat with so many unknowns is always a big challenge. People ask whether they should

worry, panic, or dismiss the threat. My policy has always been one of honesty – being forthright with the facts as we know them and frank with the gaps in our knowledge. This approach requires us to keep gathering facts as they emerge and provide frequent updates.