

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAMES: Amy Giarrusso, Steven Gremillion, Cody Ford, Adam Ferguson,
Phillip Allen

COLLECTION: 4700.3197

IDENTIFICATION: Amy Giarrusso, associate medical director for hospital medicine at OLOL; Steven Gremillion, chief medical officer for OLOL; Cody Ford, critical care medicine physician; Adam Ferguson, physician assistant, critical care medicine; Phillip Allen, head neck surgeon and VP of perioperative services

INTERVIEWER: Alyson Neel

SERIES: Our Lady of the Lake, “Under Pressure: A Louisiana Hospital’s COVID-19 Experience”

INTERVIEW DATE: August 19, 2024

FOCUS DATES: 2020-2022

ABSTRACT:

Tape 5254

Narrators introduce themselves and state their job titles; Giarrusso is a hospitalist, meaning she only practices in hospitals; she always wanted to go into medicine; a love of Sherlock Holmes’s detection inspired Gremillion to embrace medical diagnosis; now he’s a cardiologist; Ford originally wanted to pursue medical research; Ferguson always loved anatomy and biology; chose to become a physician assistant because it was quicker than medical school; Allen started in other scientific fields before coming to medicine; Giarrusso was mostly focused on office operations before pandemic; managing her staff during the pandemic; Gremillion describes the job of a chief medical officer; the pandemic accelerated what he calls “integrated operating company”; Ford describes the ICU doubling overnight; uncertainty about how contagious COVID was; conflicting information about best way to care for COVID patients; the hospital got very quiet just before the pandemic exploded; Ferguson describes the hospital departments and routine before the pandemic; feelings of hospital staff as they waited for pandemic to hit Louisiana; quickly converting floors at OLOL to serve pandemic demand; changes in how they treated respiratory symptoms due to viral spread; ventilator and supply shortage; reallocation of staff to serve pandemic needs; feeling like the pandemic would never end; dealing with new variants; Allen describes his previous role as hospital otolaryngologist; he took job as associate chief medical officer on March 1, 2020, right before pandemic hit Louisiana; Gremillion’s daughter got married on March 7, 2020, one of the last pre-COVID weddings; on March 9, first

COVID task force meeting; Ferguson canceled a trip to New York in early 2020 as number of COVID cases suddenly exploded; Allen remembers hearing about COVID during the winter, and not realizing it would come to Louisiana; Giarrusso's brother and sister-in-law were living in China, evacuated and quarantined at Andrews Air Force Base in California for twenty-one days; Ford looked to Italy and immediately saw the danger coming; Louisiana hospitals started meeting to discuss critical standards of care; deciding which patients would get access to limited supply of ventilators; discussions about rationing care; Ferguson explains different types of ventilators; news reports counting down to zero ventilators available; testing at the LSU Vet Center; patients had to be admitted until their tests came back, sometimes for several days; people who busted in hospital with cameras, determined to prove COVID was a myth; most people never saw how grim things were in the hospital: "They never saw the patients stacked like cordwood in the hallway of the ER that we couldn't get to"; panicked people flooding the ERs; people waited too long to get treatment because they were sure they'd be put on a ventilator and die; unlike other area hospitals, OLOL managed its PPE well and didn't run out; the problem of family members not being able to see for themselves how sick their loved ones were; their jobs got busier and hours got longer during the pandemic; triaging the sickest patients; Gremillion developed a new appreciation for the supply chain; Giarrusso talks about personal sacrifices made by all essential workers; her kids learned to do many things for themselves while she and her husband worked long hours in medicine; Allen describes the decontamination ritual he'd follow when getting home to protect his family; one coworker slept in his garage in a tent; other narrators describe their decontamination systems; social distancing at home; none of the narrators got bad cases of COVID; Ferguson on administering his first test to a patient: "And this guy was lethargic in bed, wouldn't wake up, hardly arousable. And I stuck that Q-Tip in his nose, and he came to life and swatted the mask right off my face. I'm like, oh, that's it. I'm dead. I'm dead."; testing nursing home residents; narrators were all afraid of COVID initially, but their fears receded once they got used to caring for COVID patients; they mention colleagues who caught COVID, including some who were home on oxygen; shortage of home oxygen tanks; oxygen lines in hospital freezing over from overuse; "Every day was reactionary...one crisis after another."; they got extra worried when Delta variant started sickening healthy young people; originally, diabetes and obesity were big risk factors; they comment on care and racial inequities; "But in the early pandemic, I feel like it was the people who you would expect to come in, the people who haven't taken care of themselves, the people who had poor health were the ones that came in first and were the sickest."; Gremillion talks about seeing his friends' twenty-one-year-old son die of COVID; difficulty in convincing college-age people to take the pandemic seriously; Ferguson explains the practice of proning for patients with ARDS [Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome]; training staff on proning during the pandemic; description of proning patients while on a ventilator; Gremillion was eager to get vaccinated as soon as it became available; Ferguson was initially skeptical of the vaccine, but then also eager; Allen felt the COVID vaccine was worth taking a chance on, despite not being tested as thoroughly as other vaccines; after reading a book about Spanish influenza, Gremillion felt optimistic about the vaccine; Ford mentions people in 1918 pandemic who refused to mask; they discuss more similarities between the Spanish flu and COVID pandemics; thoughts on public response to vaccine; weighing vaccine risks; the closer people were to COVID cases, the more they were willing to risk the new vaccine; Gremillion and Ferguson were surprised by vaccine hesitancy among the public; Allen acknowledges that the vaccine was a big leap of faith for a lot of people; pros and cons of using social media to counter health misinformation; misinformation from

within the healthcare system; making the point that vaccine could mitigate, but not necessarily prevent, COVID cases; friends, family and acquaintance asking about COVID and vaccines; people wanting to argue about vaccines; Ford's brother doesn't believe COVID was a serious threat; churches and other businesses calling and asking them for information and recommendations; people's discomfort with uncertainty; Ford: "They think our expertise is equal to their opinion. And there's also dissemination of information that is what people want to hear. Like, you eat two eggs and then you rub a crystal on your head, you'll be fine."; "But there's a lot of those people that were in the hospital and denied it until they died."; patients were convinced ivermectin would help despite lack of medical evidence; examples of patients refusing to believe they had COVID even while very sick and dying; patients visiting loved ones dying of COVID still said they wouldn't get vaccinated; medical personnel could see the difference in degree of sickness between vaccinated and unvaccinated COVID patients; Ferguson describes the fear and horror of the first week of treating COVID patients; having ten ICUs that are all full and patients overflowing; prioritizing which patients should go in ICU; Gremillion talks about outpouring of support for healthcare workers early in the pandemic; camaraderie among hospital staff; Ferguson spent a week in Yosemite National Park as a nature reset; Ford felt isolated and like he was mentally deteriorating; waving at neighbors from porches; Giarrusso played card games with her kids every day; OLOL was more organized and had more supplies than other hospitals; nursing shortage and pay issues; "Changed things forever for the way we handle a lot of things."

TAPE: 1 (T5254)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 21 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 45

OTHER MATERIALS: None

RESTRICTIONS: None